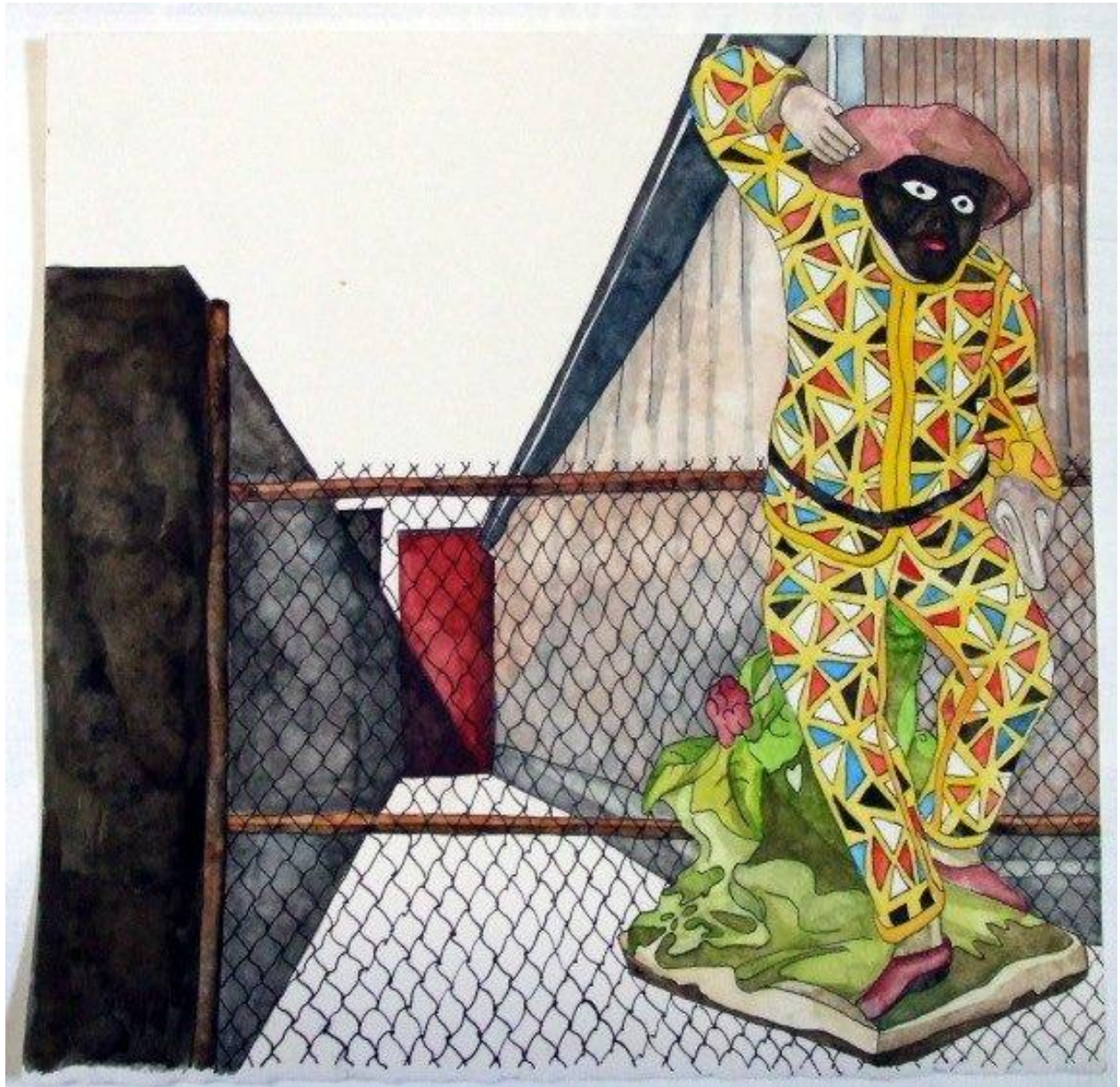


# GRIS-GRIS



by

Jay  
Halpern

I dedicate this book to:

Marie Laveau, Voodoo Queen, who flimflammed rich Southern white women in New Orleans with her “fortune-telling” to raise money and pay to privately educate the children of her Ward. To this day her mausoleum resting-place is visited by anonymous folks leaving gifts of cash or bottles of booze to any wandering soul in need, thus honoring Marie Laveau’s memory.

I dedicate this book to:

The many children and adults with mental retardation, autism, cerebral palsy, and countless other biological “anomalies” differentiating them from what is commonly believed to be “normal.” To each of them I owe my strength, my passion, and my personal value system that elevates compassion and excoriates the barbarism congealing throughout our planet at this moment in history.

I dedicate this book to:

Jackie, my wife, who enables me to fight cancer, ignorance, prejudice, and most of the  
vicissitudes of life, while making me laugh...



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I thought he was only joking. I should say, we ALL thought he was only joking. But he wasn't.

Ah, the smell of sunwarmed brick. I used to sit out on the fire-escape with my arms behind my head, leaning on the metal steps. The mica'd rock of the retaining wall smelled grey and cool. The brick for the most part smelled wet, but when the rare waxing of the sun and the warmed breezes of August reached the bricks for any length of time, they smelled sandy and ancient, like peelings off the Sphinx's ass.

I told Hobart what Jeremiah said and he shrugged it off with a laugh. Then he bunched up the last t-shirt and threw it in the washer. As usual, it took a few jiggles to work the quarter into the slot.

The smells of the rock and the brick mingled with the baked sweat of Hobart's t-shirt. A waterbug ran like hell out from beneath the roaring washer, and even though I nailed it square with the full of my boot, it didn't even crack. It made it all the way to the crack in the wall and disappeared.

"Jesus Christ," I said, "those things are getting armor-plated. Somewhere I bet in the bowels of the sewers there's this monster roach, three feet wide, pushing out tougher, new and improved babies every month. I can see the bitch squatting there now, her husband's feeding her sewer-slime and polishing her shell like the Queen of Sheba, and there she is grunting and straining and making babies like that little bastard that got away."

Hobart thought he was joking, too. I told him I didn't think it was very funny. "He's losing his sense of humor, that's all," Hobart said. "Remember, he hasn't gotten laid in a long time."

True, I mused.

Then Hobart had to go and practice.

Jean Luc Geissel scared the shit out of me when I met him for the first time. Both he and his father suffered from the effects of this rare dominant gene that made them albino and stretched their skulls into taut domes. The kids in the neighborhood called them coneheads, and laughed at them among themselves, but quietly, you see, because they were, every last one of them, deep down terrified of being attacked by one of them, if he found out. I heard from Jean Luc that there's supposed to be a colony of creatures like them out in Arizona or somewhere, that come out only at night because they'd die in the heat of the sun, and lived together, alone and at peace, in the kind of territory no normal human would ever want to live in. Jean Luc often spoke about wanting to leave the city and join them.

"So take off," I told him, dangling my feet in the water. A wad of drifting scum with a seagull feeding off it passed us on the river. Some day, I thought, everybody's going to catch whatever Jean Luc's family had with all the crap being put into what we eat and drink.

"I don't have any money," Jean Luc said.

"I'll get you the money," I said. "But I think you're just scared."

Jean Luc didn't say a word. He nodded his head back and forth a little, which he always did when he was lost in thought or having a tough time saying what was on his mind. He kept his head sort of cocked forward a little, as if he were minimizing its exposure to the outside world.

"So what if you're scared," I said. "I'd be scared, too. You know as much about Arizona and the desert with all those rattlesnakes and scorpions as you do about Africa or the moon. And just because you look like them doesn't mean they're going to accept you."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," he said.

"Fine."

There used to be an amusement park across the river. At night special events written in electric lightbulb letters would scroll across the cliffs. The contours of the Ferris wheel and roller coaster glowed neon green and mauve. Now there were nothing but high-rises.

"I got to go," Jean Luc said. He wrapped the shawl loosely over his head and stood up. A smudgy grey moth erupted out of the stony grass.

"Don't go, man," I said. "Let's walk up to the lighthouse."

He thought about it a little bit. Then he said, "No, I got to go."

"Man," I said, "you can be a depressing sonofabitch sometimes."

He didn't say anything, but took off slowly on the long walk to the Drive. I got up and headed for the nearest concrete pile to pee. I don't know, but sometimes my bladder just shakes itself loose or something and I have to pee so bad it's like that day of creation when God separated the waters of Heaven from the waters of Earth. Once, when Jean Luc and I were walking on the Viaduct, I had to pee and could watch it fall in a single golden strand on the meatpacker trucks sixty feet below. I spread my feet wider, avoiding the spreading puddle. Ah.

Then I headed for the lighthouse, myself.

Johnny Gee said I had nothing but a junk mind and wouldn't amount to anything. Maybe he was right.

There was a time you could climb in the lighthouse and watch the barges go up the river or watch the GW for jumpers. Now it was locked up tight with a cyclone fence around it. Of course, you could still see the boats on the river and watch for jumpers but it wasn't the same.

So I climbed up anyway.

Johnny Gee used to ride a bicycle all around the city, running errands for the Broadway insurance broker and the Abogado. He used to tune cars, also. He was good with his hands that way. Then suddenly he's driving a white Caddie with gold trim, red leather interior, and escorting two *putanas*. He was still a kid, though, and the *putanas* jerked him around all the time. Whenever he started acting like a tough pimp to impress the neighborhood, they'd freeze him out with a twist of their heads, ignoring him and flirting with anybody within reach. Usually they'd single me out on the stoop and ask me what I was reading and did I want to forget about my plans for the night and go out with them for a good time. The prospect of being in bed with two *putanas* at once drove me nuts, even though I knew I was being played for a pawn in their game with Johnny. He'd be steaming but didn't want to let on that he cared, that there weren't a thousand fresh *putanas* just waiting in line for him. I'd wave across the street to him, indicating the *putanas* with some obscene gestures and pointing exaggeratedly to me. "Don't ask his permission," one would say. "We do what we want whenever we want with who we want," said the other. And Johnny would force a smile, waving his arm like *go ahead, I could care less*. But the *putanas* would keep their eyes on him and after torturing him for awhile by flirting with me,

they'd cross the street and get back in the Caddie. My motorcycle could only carry one of them, anyway, and I couldn't afford a cab.

I did, however, blow a few grudging farewell kisses their way. They laughed, wiggling their butts, and blew kisses back.

O well.

I don't know what brought Johnny Gee to mind up in the lighthouse. It was probably a combination of several things: the dried condoms scattered on the floor, the peeling red paint job like Johnny's old bicycle, the shine of the sun reflected off the slow river, gleaming like Johnny's gold chains.

It could have been nothing more than the way the river rolled out of sight to the north and to the south.

Johnny and I used to talk about how rivers never really ended, that they kept reaching into other rivers and into oceans and up into mountains and all the way into the sky by way of clouds. That rivers seemed to set an example for people, encouraging us to sort of flow wherever. No end in sight, no need for an end.

Johnny's end came when he delivered the wrong package to the wrong person. It blew up in his face, taking both of them out of the rackets for good. O, Johnny was a vigorous kid and lasted for awhile in St. Luke's trauma room, but without hands, a face and a belly, the prognosis was never good. I tried to visit him there, but there were too many cops and too many relatives so I bowed out.

The river smelled like the polish off a gun. I waved at a Day Line ferry, unconcerned whether they'd call the police. I felt good thinking that tourists from all over the world maybe would take pictures of the place where Johnny Gee and I talked about endless rivers.



He was going to run for President. Jeremiah Jaffee was going to run for the Presidency of the United States!

You can imagine the look on my face when he told me that one! "Jeremiah," I said, "You're a puppeteer! What do you know about being President?"

"Not enough," he told me frankly, "but what I don't know I'll pick up on the job." He never took his eyes off the puppet he was making. "But what do any of those other guys know, either? The office of the Presidency is defined by the man who fills it." He finished painting the last curl of fur on the satyr's forehead. "There!" he said proudly. "This guy's done."

Jeremiah's puppets always seemed to come alive on your hand. He carved them with such a delicate balance, a fleshy weight to them, that they seemed to become part of your arm. When I worked his unicorn, my knuckles seemed to become like rubber and my fingers seemed to flow like anemone tendrils when I moved the facial levers. The nostrils flared and the dewlaps slid up and over the big horse teeth. You'd think this puppet had finished the mile and a furlong at Aqueduct. This new one, this satyr of his: it was phenomenal. Jeremiah could make the bushy eyes move in such a leer that you knew the puppet was just ready to leap on the very next nymph that walked by. "What do you think?"

"Jeremiah," I said, "it's a work of art. It really is."

When I put it on my right hand, I felt roots sprout from the soles of my feet all the way down to the fires at the center of the earth. It'd hard to describe the feeling, even now, even now that it's years ago when all this happened, and the history of the world changed, forever. Now

that my hands are so gnarled with arthritis that I can't hold a pen, I can still feel that fluid energy in my wrist and fingers when I think about putting on that puppet.

"You're an artist, Jeremiah," I said sincerely. "Why do you want to screw everything up by getting into politics?"

"You know," he said, looking me straight in the eye, "you're absolutely right. I have no political skills. I can't seem to fit in to the general order of mankind, if you know what I mean. I have no desire to compromise: if something's fucked up, it's fucked up, and if something's OK, it's OK. I have no desire to mix in with the Beltway set, and I'm sure I'd make myself a social pariah within seventeen minutes. My lust for women is boundless and my descents into the maelstrom of altered states of consciousness has become legendary in these parts." He put the satyr on his hand and spoke into its inquiring eyes with genuine sincerity. "Don't think I'd consider running for President one lousy second unless something rather extraordinary had happened. Something that gives me ... the *edge*."

The satyr's eyes turned conspiratorial. "And what, my young comrade in mayhem, could that edge be?"

Jeremiah had real talent ... you had to admire him for that. The satyr's voice grated with the genuine rasp of aged phlegm. His words had an edge of resonance, as if spoken into an empty barrel.

Jeremiah grinned his demon's grin. "That, my young creation, remains for you to find out."

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Hobart wasn't in a pleasant mood. Even his cats hid until he cooled out. It was an especially hot day, one of his music students had an emotional crisis during their session and pulled a knife on him, and the landlord, Mr. Finklestein, caught up with him before he could go down in the elevator. Frankly, I never understood why Finklestein, with all his millions in Manhattan real estate, was compelled to subject himself to Hobart's abuse once a month. There was something menstrual about that, I'm sure of it. Hobart's lousy two bills for that flea-infested sunless tomb which Finklestein couldn't give away free to a bag lady. Once a month they got red in the face and dueled their sharp noses Hobart jiggling his French horn case as if he were warming up to slam it into the landlord's face, and Finklestein with his weak heart and his ulcer trembling, shaking his fist under Hobart's black beard, pointing at the walls with his free hand. Hobart wants the place fixed up, Finklestein wants his rent, and on and on, monthly, like a phase of the moon or a sabbat ritual.

All things considered, Hobart had seen better days. "Suck a bunch of blowjobs," was all he said when he came into the apartment. I never asked him where he picked up his expressions. He delivered them, however, with such vocal sincerity and contempt that, inane as they were, they had the force of a shamanic incantation. Hobart was a man to be reckoned with.

I held out a joint to him but he turned me down. In fact, he grabbed it out of my hand, crushed it, and threw it in the overfilled garbage can. Right into the moist container stinking with Chinese snail sauce.

"Thanks, Hobart," I said. "Had a rough day?"

"That cunt!" he began.

"Don't tell me about it. I don't want to hear."

"I'm all the way out on Staten Island to give this lesson, see, and she goes nuts!"

"I just want to know if you're going to be on Jeremiah's show?"

"She has to decide she's not happy being a Lesbian right in the middle of her piece and starts arguing with this imaginary girlfriend of hers. I'm backing up in my seat and checking my watch but the session's not even half over. Then she throws her horn at the wall, stands up with a blade pointing right at my face, calls me Maryann and almost cuts off my nose. And that's when my day was going well."

I have to confess that whenever Hobart had a bad day, he made me laugh. You had to see his little face like a blanched egg framed in a Cossack's dark beard and fur hat. It would grow even paler and his eyes narrowed, and his lips flapped a mile a minute. He always had to analyze whatever bad happened to him, as if to absolve himself from having caused it to happen. I could never make him understand that some people just did bad things to other people for no damn reason at all, and that he shouldn't always take it so personally.

He did happen to have more than his share of such incidents, however. Maybe something in his genetics attracted abuse ... I don't know. But, Jesus, I can see him now telling me about that chick with the knife and how he had to finesse it away from her and on and on when all the time I can see him shifting the horn into its case, backing off toward the door, trying to calm her with the same sweetly ingratiating lies that you use to calm an angry dog, while slipping out the exit.

"Why don't you save that story for Jeremiah's show?" I said.

"Huh?"

"Then all of Manhattan can hear it at the same time instead of you dragging it out for three months. C'mon. It's funny. The viewers will love it."

"I don't find it so goddamn funny."

"Relax. It's funny. Take my word for it."

Hobart almost seemed to consider the proposal. He didn't say a word while he fed the cats and cut a loud fart.

Her name was Cassandra Sharpe and I knew when I met her that she was the one who drove Jeremiah crazy.

She worked as a stripper at the Blue Eye Burlesk. Anybody familiar with Times Square back in those days will have no trouble remembering the huge neon eye that hung over the west sidewalk. First it would glow wide open and incredulous for a couple of seconds, then the circuits would switch and the eye would shutter down into an enticing wink. Meyer, the dwarf, would be standing right underneath it, handing out leaflets and hawking the variety of shows within. Meyer seemed to be as much a fixture of the place as the Eye or the fire hydrant at curbside: rain, snow, tornado, he was always *there*, nudging the curious-but-nervous types past the line of hookers and into the emporium to begin the time-consuming yet thorough process of parting them from their coin. Nikos, the Greek, kept his souvlaki barque parked out front, as well, a novel creation done up to look like the prow of a boat he said belonged to somebody famous from his homeland named Odysseus. I never heard of the guy, but the way he pulled souvlaki, hot dogs and hot pretzels out of separate portholes was pretty neat and attracted a lot of business. What interested me most about the Blue Eye, I told Jeremiah, was the way at night it turned the faces of the people walking underneath it into grey corpses. We stood outside awhile one night and just watched the world passing by and I pointed this phenomenon out to him. He nodded agreement, patting me on the shoulder. "Good point," he said. "Zombies. They look like zombies."

Cassandra Sharpe worked there as a stripper but stripping at the Blue Eye wasn't like stripping anywhere else in the world. The place was owned by this Czech intellectual named Jan Wit who wanted to make it the kind of place that would have appealed to "*fin de siècle decadents*." "Not just the fags," he felt compelled to clarify, "but for all those artistes for whom decadence was an expression of their aesthetic, an integral part of their lifestyle."

The lighting inside was muted mauve and the peep show booths were trimmed in plush leather. Jan recruited the bouncers from the local gyms and decked them out in buccaneer outfits which advertised their muscles without suggesting aggressiveness. Jan was a smart businessman. By making his strip joint look classy, he discouraged the scumbags who wandered in from doing their usual number in the place. Most of them, in fact, wandered in and wandered out within minutes, leaving their semen and urine in the other joints along the Minnesota Strip. The tourists who enjoyed the atmosphere tended to stay longer and spend more money on a variety of carnal delights.

In fact, Jan was often told he should have set up shop in a classier part of town. "That would defeat my purpose," he would say. "Leaving the stolid luxury of the Faubourg St. Germain or Bloomsbury was part of the aesthetic pilgrimage. It is *essential* to soil oneself in the process of nurturing those darker, more mythic recesses of one's psyche."

If that's the case, old Jan put his club in the right place. It's common knowledge around the world that the Strip crawls with bums, scumbags, perverts, and a variety of unclassifiable weirdos. They are, for the most part, harmless, although they'd like you to think differently. One black bimbo with two gold front teeth bumped up against me once and asked for money. I ignored her and she got nasty. "Gimme a quarter or I'll shoot ya," she said, but I told her to fuck off and kept walking.

Maybe that Baudelaire guy would've written a poem.

Historians over the last twenty-five years have written many books about "THE JAFFE YEARS." Too many books, if you ask me. All of them with an axe to grind, all of them using Jeremiah's life as a springboard for their learned somersaults. And yet none of them ever figured out how Jeremiah got his "edge."

None of them ever heard of Cassandra Sharpe.

Jeremiah had been seeing her for several months before I ever got to meet her. When she walked up to us from the 79th Street station, Jeremiah had this smile on his face that went straight down to his asshole. She was very beautiful. In fact, she had the sort of looks which made a man rethink whatever idea he had of what it means for a woman to be beautiful. Women who are truly beautiful are unique. The way they move, the way they talk, the way they look are like nothing a man anticipates. If God, Himself, came down in a pillar of flame and ordered me to invent the most beautiful woman that ever lived, I couldn't have come close to conceiving what Cassandra was in the flesh, that's how beautiful she was.

And she was a stripper at the Blue Eye. I couldn't wait to catch her performance.

Not just a stripper, either. Jan made her manager of the whole floorshow operation. She worked with four other women drawn from the finest stripping talent in the world, integrated their routines into one "aesthetic whole" (as Jeremiah put it), and even chose the tapes and the lighting for each week's "theme." Jan compared her with Isadora Duncan and Rosetti's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." Personally, I think Jan wanted to be whipped by her, but that's just the impression I got.



The stage was a large "X" made out of polished cherry wood. Every knothole and fissure was filled with opals. The center of the "X" was where each stripper did her floorwork, although at the Blue Eye there was some new central prop which reflected that week's "theme." The prop also provided the backdrop for each stripper's climactic masturbation sequence.

The first time I caught Cassandra's act, she had called it "Meshe in Blue Minor." Each of the strippers wore mesh stockings and garterbelts. The footlights were various tints and shades of blue, which transformed the strippers into a kind of astral vision of erotic goddesses. They stripped and masturbated to tightly-woven selections from Bach's "Mass in B Minor", and I assure you there wasn't a soft cock in the place five minutes into the production.

Cassandra had male psychology down pat.

What I mean by that is any man entering her theater felt from the outset that he had been transported to another place and time. Historians write about temple prostitutes and religions in which the sexual experience was made so profound as to bring men and women face-to-face with their God. Cassandra's talent and stagecraft made the same thing happen for every down-and-out shmuck who paid the ten bucks to watch her. Nobody jerked off, nobody got up in the middle of a routine to grab a smoke, nobody read the newspaper, nobody slipped the strippers cash to suck their tits or feel them up. And when you left the theater, you had this crazy feeling you had just left the universe hidden in a church's stained glass window and were forced now by certain mysterious inner voices to preach a new gospel to the unenlightened. I'm sure the content of that gospel varied from man to man, but that's some idea of the effect Cassandra Sharpe had on her audience.

Jeremiah maintained all his life that she was the best thing to ever hit Broadway.

Ward Stevenson broke his neck jumping into a neighbor's swimming pool from the garage. He and the other guys had each made three or four successful landings but Ward's luck just happened to run out. From that day on, he couldn't move anything except his bowels from his neck down.

He lived in an apartment on West 82nd. It was the middle floor of a brownstone, the windows opening to the north. He lived with a capuchine monkey named Eddie that opened his food for him, worked the levers of his electric wheelchair, and adjusted the shortwave radio for broadcast. A personal care attendant assigned to Ward by the state services showed up twice a week to make sure everything was properly stowed away in its place, that all essential services like the phone and electricity and gas were intact, and that Eddie hadn't dropped dead or run off. A social worker showed up once a month but the odor of colostomy bags and monkey kept her visits brief.

I was that attendant for over a year. Even now that I'm crippled in almost every joint and confined to a bed in a geriatric shelter in Tolbrook, Connecticut, I can just begin to understand what Ward had to accept about himself without one moment's notice.

He explained about the short wave. "I'm just a mouth and a mind," he said. "I fight with myself every day to keep them both working. Either one would give out with just the slightest encouragement. The radio keeps me in touch with the outside world. I have friends from the oddest places who insist on giving me opportunities to survive. One, a retired military man from Australia, plays chess with me. A lonely woman from Kentucky, fully aware of my condition, has wanted to marry me for five years. She woos me with music and small talk every Saturday

night. I share commodities predictions with a fanatic in Arizona and an ex-madame from Fargo, North Dakota, shares the latest horror stories regarding environmental pollution and the crap the world eats."

He called Eddie by whistling three tones. The monkey was sitting on the window seat looking down at the cars and picking at his crotch. He seemed a bit reluctant to turn his fingers toward less gainful pursuits, but over the years he had learned to tolerate Ward's sudden needs and made his way onto the table, his black, wrinkled fingers flipping the power switch and turning the large dial.

"I'm considered something of a radical on the airwaves," Ward said proudly. "People who don't know me think I go around planting letterbombs in mailboxes and plotting assassinations. They're threatened by libertarians. And confined as I am, I suppose I find what few liberties are left to me all the more precious."

"Good for you," I said, sponging his shoulders.

Eddie seemed to know Ward's favorite frequencies by the quality of the static. Otherwise, I have no idea how that monkey worked the tuner. At Ward's nod Eddie trundled onto his chair and rode the lever until Ward's mouth was next to the suspended microphone. Then Eddie went back to the window to pick at his crotch.

What I was to learn was that Ward used that particular frequency to broadcast his opinions to the world. He never had the monkey switch into "receive" mode on that frequency because he wanted no feedback from the random ham operators who caught his broadcast. "I enjoy, at times, just sending my thoughts out on the airwaves," he explained. "Like messages sent adrift in bottles. I bask in the illusion that some of my ideas have provoked some of the profound political and economic changes we see happening in the world today."

"That's an amazing machine you've got there," I said, admiring the radio.

And one hell of a monkey.

Mortality, and what we must sing to transcend it!

My memory's dying like the rest of me. What I do recall comes from the most unexpected quarters of my mind. I was in a way fortunate to have been surrounded for a part of my life with people who were extremists. Extremists leave strong imprints on the memory and inspire those around them to perform extraordinary actions. These experiences then provide the stuff of memory which consoles us when our flesh becomes our jailer rather than our co-conspirator. If I looked back on my life and saw that I had all along lived in a self-made prison, fearing to be myself and to take chances dealing off the top of life's stacked deck, I'm sure I'd swallow thump tacks or throw myself out a window in a fit of despair.

Now, at least, I can still cough up a few laughs. In a few months, maybe a few weeks, or tomorrow, God forbid!, I may be like old Farber down the hall. His mind is shot. He just stares down at his feet under the blanket at the end of the bed and, once in a blue moon, whispers something about rain.

Years before Jeremiah left town for Washington, he took me and Jean Luc on an expedition to the very top of the Riverside Church tower. We climbed out the stone window of the observation deck and pulled ourselves up the radio antenna to a carved granite niche where we could grab a bite to eat and watch the ways of the great world unfold beneath us.

To the west, the great river with whitecaps tossing the brutal summer sun's glare up at us to hide the sludge and crap that was flowing out to sea. To the east, Harlem, looking dingy and abused, as if some giant had scraped soot off his boots onto the tenements while passing through to the East River. To the north, the GW bridge and the river's northern promise of distant lands ripe for settlement and the making of new lives. And to the south, the great Valhalla of

commerce and industry, Manhattan's bellicose towers rising like a forest of middle fingers in the faces of those gods and goddesses that had ordained mankind must crawl like beasts upon the face of the earth.

Jeremiah spoke about Zeus looking down upon the earth like this from his throne set in the mountain clouds of Olympus. For myself, I brought binoculars.

On the most private tower of Union Seminary far below, two fag divinity students sunbathed naked. On the roof of Furnald Hall a young woman practiced nude yoga. Somewhere around 113th Street two topless women in shorts were flexing their pectorals for a photographer. Through a ninth floor window of International House, two lovers enjoyed a passionate afternoon delight.

And among all the towers of stone and concrete, carried on winds that went unnoticed by all creatures fixed to the surface of the world, flew seagulls and a few hardy pigeons, soaring and gliding in effortless flight, keeping a herdsman's watchful eye on those whose garbage and droppings kept their flocks alive.

"Christ," said Jeremiah, "it's beautiful up here. You wouldn't know it was mid-August with the wind." He passed out the sandwiches. "And yet --"

He was looking down on the Grant Projects. By his sudden dark expression I knew he was remembering the little girl who had been dragged to the roof, gangraped and tossed off like a limp rag doll that had outlived its usefulness.

"Look!" Jean Luc called out, pointing south.

Several gold sparkles drifted toward us on the wind. I couldn't for the life of me figure out what those things were.

"They must be putting fresh gold leaf on the Ukrainian church downtown," Jeremiah explained. "That stuff's hard to handle in any kind of wind."

When we climbed down from the antenna tower, we were smiling. It was a great adventure. We had shared some risk to look out upon a land where even the sky was paved with gold.

Mr. Abelard Geissel was afraid that his grandson, Jean Luc, was getting himself involved with voodoo.

I met the old man when he came up from New Orleans for a visit. He was square and vigorous with kinky white hair and skin as black and shiny as fresh tar. There was no doubt about how much he loved Jean Luc, and how worried he was. The three of us were walking west across Morningside Park when the old man stopped me short and said, "You seem like a man with good sense and values. I want you to look out for my grandson."

Naturally, I found this embarrassing. I could see Jean Luc's head sink deep into his shawl.

"It's not right neither he nor his father was born like normal men," the old man continued, pinning me to a lamppost with his crazy eyes. "It's a punishment visited on them for some of my many sins. THE SINS OF THE FATHER SHALL BE VISITED UPON THE SONS. You remember that. It's not fair, but you better remember it anyway."

He turned to Jean Luc and shook his head sadly. "You got troubles enough, boy. I can imagine how hurt inside you're gonna feel at times. Maybe all the time. I know. I felt like that when your father was born. Nobody from our side of town ever saw a baby like that before. Now, if there'd been a cawl or something like that would have eventually fallen off, then there'd have been cause for rejoicing. Or if you at least had been born like a normal cripple with something wrong with you that people could understand, y'know what I mean? But white skin and a pointy head?

"Shit. I went straight to my wife's mother and said, 'Gimme the gris-gris bag.' She said there wasn't any, and that if she had found one pinned to the door, she'd have told me. I said,



'Then how do you explain it?' She couldn't say a word or even look me in the eye. She never did show me the bag, but I know she found it and hid it, figuring to get her own revenge in her own time. Those old women back there in Jefferson Parish were all mambos, every one of them. They'd rather get chewed by alligators than let a man get involved with their mojo-business.

"Nothing I could do about it ever. When my son grew up and couldn't stand life in Jefferson Parish any more being treated the way he was, he ran away up North to disappear, if he could, in a big city."

The old man quieted down then clapped his arm around his grandson's shoulders. "Then I get a letter that this little rascal, Jean Luc, came along. I remember his grandma and me hugging each other and crying. 'With the black is mixed the white, Abelard,' she told me. And we hurried up north to hold him in our arms," and goddamn but the old man starts to cry. "Jean Luc was a lively puppy from the start," he continued. "Strong and healthy with the finest set of lungs in the city, I can tell you that!" The old man dabbed at his eyes with an elaborate white handkerchief. "Damn mother wasn't nowhere to be found. None of us ever did see or hear from her again."

He turned to me suddenly and grabbed each shoulder with a heavy paw. His eyes blazed. "I went to Lady Marie's tomb with a bottle of good red wine. I made my X with a piece of brick from another tomb and rapped three times. Then I almost choked with the smell of Lady Marie's spirit. It smelled like a bog fire mixed with the scrapings off a tomb. I ask my question, 'What is the state of my grandson's soul?' and I hear the Lady's own voice inside my head." He pressed his palms to his temples while he remembered the voice and the words. "She told me Jean Luc was standing on the edge of voodoo. That's why I came up North and why I'm asking you, his friend, to keep an eye out for him."

I assured the old man that I always kept my eyes out for my friends.

## §

Jeremiah's first appearance on Mike Slovaki's public access TV show made media history. He brought several puppets. One was the puppet he modeled after his father, Harry Jaffee.

Mike duped a tape for me. I've played it over and over, maybe five hundred times over the last twenty-five years. I was hooked on Jeremiah's performance from the first. I memorized whole passages.

For example, his speech holding the Harry Jaffee puppet:

### **Jeremiah**

My old man, Harry, dropped dead of a heart attack just before he turned 70. I made this Harry puppet to be there for me when I needed to conjure up my dad's voice. You see, Harry Jaffee gave me some pretty pertinent advice. 'Don't do as I do, do as I say,' comes to mind right off the bat.

### **Harry**

I'd be the first to acknowledge the errors of my own ways. Somehow, though, I never felt it was as important to discontinue committing them.

### **Jeremiah**

See what I mean? A human being with that sort of candor and honesty is a rare phenomenon. Maybe five or six in a century.

### **Harry**

Son, you're getting carried away.

**Jeremiah**

Maybe so. The fact is, Harry died from a myocardial infarction. I was at his side that night, sitting next to him on the edge of the bed.

**Harry**

I was glad you were with me, son. You were a comfort.

**Jeremiah**

No, there was no way I could comfort my father. The ambulance was called, I was dressed and ready for the ride to the hospital, there was nothing else I could do but talk to him, listen to him, be there for him, and wait. Meanwhile, the tissue of his heart wall had collapsed and was slowly tearing apart. All he could say to me was, 'Jeremiah, Jeremiah, is the ambulance coming? It hurts so bad, O God I need something for the pain, Jeremiah, is that ambulance coming?' That night I learned there is nothing noble, glamorous or prophetic about pain and death. That's the night I became a political pacifist.

**Harry**

Could you define 'political pacifist,' please? After all, I was a decorated officer having served in two world wars . . .

**Jeremiah**

C'mon, dad. You were too young for the first and too old for the second. Maybe you wanted to attend West Point, but you never did attend West Point. I think, in fact, that you might have spent the greater part of the rest of your life trying to prove your manhood to yourself because you had never experienced battle. It's a common syndrome.

**Harry**

A father needs to encourage illusions in his children. Particularly if those illusions encourage good character, when the truth might do the opposite. Do as I say, not as I do. Now, your definition...?

**Jeremiah**

Compulsive gambling, party girls, and a vain man's confrontation with unrelenting old age. Dad, I'm amazed you held out so long and in such good shape.

**Harry**

Good shape? Three heart attacks, an ulcer that required removal of 2/3 of my stomach, years spent swallowing gelusil and nitroglycerin.

**Jeremiah**

Relatively speaking, I meant. The ladies all loved you and you were a great dancer.

**Harry**

I do have some fine qualities. But now, your definition...?

**Jeremiah**

I will fight and I will, if necessary, willingly kill someone who threatens me with harm or threatens someone I care for. I have even risked myself for total strangers being raised by you on platitudes revolving around concepts such as honor, chivalry and the sanctity of the human's fidelity in a heterosexual relationship. But I draw the line at fighting somebody else's battle. I refuse to be sucked into some *person's*, or some *government's*, hidden agenda. That's political pacifism.

## **Harry**

Well, son, I can certainly live with that! Of course, it make's perfectly good sense. I'm proud of you!

## **Jeremiah**

Don't all you sons out there wish you could hear that kind of talk from your fathers? Thank God for public access TV and support your local hook-up. And no more running your own lines to your apartments from the roof. Fair is fair, now . . .

But, getting back to the night Harry died. I learned something else that night, something very significant. There was Harry sitting on the edge of the bed describing the pain to me as 'a knife stuck all the way through me, and twisting, twisting . . . ' etc.

And in come the medics. The first guy already has the needle out and loaded. They take vital signs and in it goes. My dad jolted upright, stunned, then slowly lowered himself onto the stretcher with a smile on his face that stretched down to his asshole. He leans my ear down to his mouth and whispers, "Jeremiah, for Christ's sake, I know why people become addicts..."

That was my first exposure to the effects of hard drugs...

I've played that tape over and over. When Mike and the boys closed out that session, they were jubilant. The phones rang off the hook. Other cable systems paid for broadcast rights. The Slovaki entourage became celebrities throughout the Upper West Side. They would be photographed at restaurants, gorging themselves because, let's be honest, they were big boys. Every restaurant in town wanted a photo of them chowing down on its specialty, that look of

cherubs-in-heaven plastered all over their faces. Within six months, Mike and the boys had offers to go national.

"Jesus Christ," I said to Jeremiah that night while he was packing up the puppets, "you made some friends *tonight!* Maybe you will become President."

He smiled back at me and said, "Now you're catching on, kid ..."

First, let me tell you about Lake Zoar.

Jeremiah brought Cassie and me up there because he needed to visit an old friend. The lake is fourteen miles long and artificial, created by the building of the Stevenson Dam across the Housatonic River in Connecticut. Somewhere at the bottom of the lake is an abandoned train, some tracks, and the remnants of an old station. There are also the remains of a whole slew of folks whose tombstones were moved to higher ground and now reside at the Riverside Cemetery. They were supposed to move the coffins too, back then, in order not to profane the dead in the flooding. But human nature being what it is, the townspeople got worn out dragging the tombstones uphill and stopped bothering about the whole project. O, the old timers might have a different story to tell about why the bodies were left to be desecrated, but that's the real reason and don't let them fool you.

Besides, if they hadn't have left the bodies to rot under the lake, I never would have met Lurinda's ghost.

There's definitely witchcraft in those Lake Zoar hills. I could smell it in the air as soon as we arrived. A crispness, I'd have to say, a kind of crystal clarity in the air and in the way the breezes off the hills shear against each other and against steep cliffs which once were hilltops. Eagles roost over by Shapaug Dam and any short walk in the hills will reveal deer spoor and chewed saplings. I once walked along the lake's edge and came upon an osprey preening. There's even this tree which grew up from underneath a large boulder and now, fully mature, curves up and over it like a protective mother. When the moon and stars float over the lake, I can actually feel the curved geometry of the universe, I can feel myself standing on some vast



round ball of a planet, I can feel the nearness of the other planet-balls in comparison with the background suns . . . I recall one winter night sitting under a bare elm and watching the stars from beneath its web of branches. Suddenly, I felt as if I were at the center of a vast crystal eyeball, veined by the tree's branches, which stared forever out upon the stars. We were all one in that moment, the Stars and the Eye, the Vision and the Viewer.

I don't know. Something in the air or the water up there makes people think like that.

It's the UFO capital of the world. And up the lake from where we stayed, a man killed his wife and ran her body through a woodchipper in order to spray the evidence all over the lake. He got convicted, anyway.

Something dark and magical in the air, I suppose, or the water.

A ferret will climb inside anything that has an inside to it because it is the ferret's nature. A slug will drink beer until it drowns.

And Jeremiah will fall in love.

He told me he took after his father, old Harry Jaffee, who was a true Romantic. "'You can fall in love with a rich girl as easily as with a poor girl' he used to say to me," Jeremiah said, "but he never took his own advice. Unfortunately for him, there wasn't a mercenary bone in his body. He'd give the shirt off his back to any pleasing bimbo with soft eyes and a lying tongue. I think he felt he was somehow unworthy to make moral choices and decided to offer up his weakness to the Supreme Goddess as a sacrifice. The weaker he became, the more weakness he had to offer, and he was happy. Satisfied."

There's no question Jeremiah learned to love Cassandra Sharpe. I could tell by the way he looked at her when she wasn't looking, and by the way he could stand apart from her, giving her her space, and still feel comfortable. When they talked he looked her right in the eye and took every word she said seriously. It was more than just the sex, too, because Jeremiah was no virgin and neither was she and I don't think sex in and of itself meant that much to either of them. Or maybe I'm just picking up the way he held her hand, as if at least for the moment, that simple touch was all the sex he needed.

Other women brushed up against his life and maybe for a little while he'd get confused, maybe lose his perspective in the rush toward adventure, but he kept spinning back to Cassie like a comet to the sun. Cassie understood. She was very wise. I don't mean that as stupidly as it must seem, Cassie being "wise." It's just that nothing Jeremiah did ever frightened her, made her

lose her balance. She was way ahead of him, that's all, and that, I suppose, is what kept him in her orbit.

Once he realized he was in love with her, he wanted to bring her to Lake Zoar. It is the sort of place where one should consummate love. It was also back then the site of Quincunx, a very special school for special people.

At the top of the hill was the tree and the stone, at the bottom was Quincunx. Marius Bonnier was the school's guardian angel. An ex-alcoholic, he insisted he was "recovering, not recovered" in true AA fashion. But his life had become so full through his involvement with Quincunx that I figured the point was moot. Whether he drank or didn't drink really no longer mattered. He could never drift back into the life he once led. But I could never convince him of that. And I didn't try. Leave well enough alone, I always say.

The woman who ran the day-to-day activities of the school was Twyla Cuahla. She came of a theater family and started her career as a leading lady. There's no doubt she was beautiful even in her late forties and all I could do was envy the guys who dated her when she was in her prime. She left acting for production and became a big mover and shaker in the entertainment money world. And then she hit the skids. Unhappy, I suppose, with the men who latched onto her and drifting more into the megabucks party scene, her better instincts became misted over with vanities like winter frost on a window until she woke up one day in detox.

Yes, I'm told there were tears and recriminations and the whole nine yards. But more to the point there was Molly McCord. This was Molly's third detox. Her husband came home and found her shitfaced, the apartment looked like a bomb just went off, and the baby was screaming and crawling freely toward the edge of the dining room table. He took the baby and split, never to be seen or heard from again. Molly roused herself sufficiently from her stupor to call the

parish priest, but he had a big wedding that night, a catered affair, and couldn't come over to see her. She passed out and woke up in detox. There were vague memories like the stuff of old dreams, the police, the neighbors, flashing blue and red lights, but mostly her stupor was thick and black as squid's ink.

Molly and Twyla eventually became good friends. Good enough, in fact, for Molly to share her secret.

There had been a first baby, a little girl. There was nothing noticeably deficient about her until she began to toddle. Then Molly and her husband began to notice a vagueness about their daughter, whom they had named Celeste, and one night Molly shot up in bed in the dark, realizing that for some reason her daughter's mind had stopped growing, it had already stopped growing and she was only sixteen months old.

When Celeste was ten years old, Molly signed the papers with her husband. She had had it, she was too tired to argue, too tired to feel much of anything.

Twyla promised to visit Celeste with her when they both got out. They found her at the special school sitting in a corner in wet pants, surrounded by other classmates who, having nothing better to do, were twisting their fingers in front of their eyes, playing with their spit or sharply smacking their heads against the walls. Celeste had already turned twenty-one but there was nowhere to send her. Molly went up to her daughter to take a good look at her, the first in eleven years.

"Celeste's eyes," Twyla told me, "were bright and darted back and forth around the room. Molly wanted her to look at her but she couldn't seem to hold her eyes still. Molly took her chin and turned her face toward her, only to find in the sudden smile a mouthful of feces."

I can sympathize with Molly's running out crying. I almost had the dry heaves just hearing about it.

"I was afraid Molly would never want to try to reach her daughter again," Twyla said. "But I was wrong. I was hugging her out in the hall of the school and she said through her tears, 'I can't leave her here with these people, no more I can't, who let her live like that, who can't watch out for one when there are so many.'"

The immobile flesh grows pale and loses its shape over time. Ward's hands and feet began to look like they'd been painted on him by one of those old time artists who were only good at painting robes hands and feet and all the robes hands and feet looked the same. I told him he should start wearing robes instead of putting both of us through the aggravation of getting him dressed.

"It's not like you ever let me take you anyplace," I told him. "So if you're going to live like a monk, dress like one."

"Does dressing me bother you? Does touching a dead body with blood still moving through it give you the willies?"

"Hell no," I said, pulling up the last sock and looking him straight in the eye. "I get off on dead bodies. Some of my best friends have dead bodies. I lay awake at night just thinking about them, getting all excited and mushy. Yours is still too warm for my taste, but give yourself time."

So much for Ward's self-pity. His cheeks reddened and he asked me to push him to the window.

"'To' or 'out' did you say?" I needled him some more. "I didn't quite hear."

"'To' will be just fine. You made your point."

Miles Davis lived right down the street. Anytime we spotted one of those flashy sports cars, like a Lamborghini or Ferrari, we knew someone was visiting Miles. Hobart told me how this white guy and his date were visiting Miles and Miles pulled out this gun, pointed it right at the white guy's temple, and said, "You gotta go, but she can stay." Now, I don't know how much

that story gained in translation, but I'd bet it's not easy saying "No" about anything to a guy like Miles.

"You doing any music on your show tonight?" I asked Ward.

"I haven't decided."

Eddie the monkey climbed on my lap for a hug. Mature capuchins are big sons of bitches, like ten-year olds, and aren't overly concerned about stepping on your balls. But I liked playing with him. I liked taking his head between my hands and blowing right into his face. He'd make all these ridiculous faces and blow fart-noises out his lips. Then we'd noogie each other and then I'd grab at him and try to tickle him. I didn't know monkeys could be ticklish until I met Eddie. I didn't know how human they could be, either. Sometimes Eddie seemed to fit right in with our moods, like he was some hairy immigrant who didn't speak the language but nonetheless could make his sympathies known for the rest of us who were outcasts or far from home or trapped in a shell of flesh which didn't quite fit in with the mainstream environment.

He picked through my hair for bugs.

"You haven't done music in awhile," I said. "I've got some Traver Hollow tapes with me, if you'd like to do some bluegrass."

"Bluegrass? Jesus, I haven't listened to bluegrass in years. Why don't you play it?"

Even Eddie started bopping after a few minutes. If any kind of music could make Ward stand up and kick shit, it would be bluegrass. He was smiling and rocking his head back and forth. "That's a good idea," he said. "I'll use it tonight."

"Good."

"And what about your friend, Jeremiah? Has he gotten the endorsement of both major parties, yet?"

"Go ahead, laugh." I unfolded Wisdom's Child, the Westside's free radical rag, and read the lead political piece out loud:

We aren't really concerned whether Jaffee's political aspirations are genuine or if he has embarked on a grand experiment in media art. Every time he manages to fix himself up with a public forum, like last night's reading at the Universalist Church, he scores big points for his political cause. He reads a poem he wrote about the serene Buddha and later advocates castration without incarceration for rapists. "Each morning when they look down to pee, they'll remember the horror of what they did, just as the victim remembers everyday, day after day, for the rest of her life. Fair is fair." His fans who came to see a puppet show are astounded. His radical supporters are in stitches. And the staid conservatives slumming for the night on the west side have this uneasy look on their faces, as if they are grappling with a surrealist play off-off-Broadway.

By the time we left the Church, we deeply regretted that it will be two years before we can vote for Jaffee for President.

Blah blah blah. Etc.

"This guy sounds like he's nuts," said Ward. "But fascinating."

"He's not nuts."

"How can you say he isn't nuts. I mean, if it's all a big joke, ok, that's funny. But if he's serious about a national campaign, he has absolutely no anchor stuck in the real world."

"O, his anchor's in all right. Why don't you invite him on your show tonight? Have some of your fellow hams ask him questions. Listen to him yourself, and then tell me if you think he's nuts."

Ward stared out the window, deciding.

"Jeremiah's simply trying to cut the crap out of his life. Something's definitely changed about him, but it's not that he's gone crazy. No, he seems to be onto a big secret and feels that now is the time he can make some changes in the world. 'I cultivated my garden long enough,' he



once told me, 'and now everybody else's weeks are joining with my own to strangle me. It's time to spray.' It's as if Jeremiah has a way of growing beyond himself now. He refuses to acknowledge his limitations to be anything more serious than abstract notions. He's learned to look them in the eye and wink them away."

Ward thought to himself that that was a secret worth knowing.

"Ask him to join me tonight, will you?"

§

Jeremiah called it the Parable of the Snail and the Sailor. He performed it on the Mike Slovaki public access TV show and it went like this:

**Snail**

I'd like to discuss freedom with you, if I may.

**Sailor**

Certainly.

**Snail**

My mother told me she exercised free choice when she selected my father from among all the other male snails to give her offspring. My father told me that he exercised free choice when he chose the time to start hunting for a mate and began the process of becoming a father. Yet the resolution of their choices depended on each other.

**Sailor**

I don't quite follow.

**Snail**

If my mother had turned my father down, or if she had not been around at all and he had not found a mate quite so willing, his free choice would have been curtailed by circumstances. He would have been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

**Sailor**

As happens to me in many a port, I'm sorry to say.

### **Snail**

And if my father had not been around when my mother needed him, she would have been forced to make a choice from among a collection of less satisfactory males, and once again free choice is curtailed by circumstance. Or maybe she would have been forced to look harder and longer at the competition, Sailor, and possibly made a better choice, no offense intended.

### **Snail**

I hadn't thought of that. Even so, I should imagine we could express our individual degree of freedom in the form of a mathematical equation taking  $F = \text{freedom}$ ,  $C = \text{choice}$ , and  $O = \text{options}$ , thus producing  $F = O/C$ , the greater the options producing the greater freedom

### **Sailor**

But what about C? If that's a variable that also increases in quantity, F will be reduced and freedom will be constrained.

### **Snail**

Ah, but C must be a binary function, either 1 or 0. One either makes a choice or one is prevented by some shall I say catastrophe from making a choice at all. Choosing not to choose is a special choice and would be represented with both the numerator and denominator as 1. Thus, we have freedom always and at all times being directly proportional to the number of options, or else we have the unique case with a division by zero representing chaos or singularity or ... or ... or the miraculous.

### **Sailor**

The miraculous?

### **Snail**

Yes, intervention by the divine, some rupture in the cosmic order of things that makes the process of free choice irrelevant under the circumstances. Abraham at his son's altar and Moses at the burning bush might piss and moan but they are the least free of all beings at those unique moments. That's when choice becomes the zero-denominator.

### **Sailor**

Say, is this supposed to be some sort of mathematical proof of God?

**Snail**

Not quite. It demonstrates that we are always and at all times free unless the numerator is 1 (which represents choosing not to choose) or the denominator is 0 (which represents chaos or deity).

**Sailor**

With all this interest in freedom, my friend, may I ask why you carry a shell on your back?

**Snail**

For the same reasons you carry the seven winds on yours.

They tell me there's a cold spell this winter. People are freezing to death all over the city. They tell me I'm one of the lucky ones because I had the good luck to be locked up in this hell-hole years ago, and this winter there are waiting lines to get in just to be kept warm.

I'm kept warm, all right. I get my news about the weather from orderlies and nurses and I get the smell of winter off their coats and shoes, that cold fresh smell that makes me want to scream with rage that I'm stuck inside listening to them piss and moan about the snow and how long they had to crank their engines and who skidded where and God, don't I have it lucky that I don't have to concern myself with such things.

Maybe it's all this talk of winter that makes me keep remembering that summer when Jeremiah went off and changed the world. That was the summer we worked for Shimkin, the slumlord, down on East Fifth, tarring roofs, no less, in the hottest August sun. Like most tenements the place was a walk-up and we didn't have any fancy winches to haul the tarpaper up to the roof, so we shouldered them one at a time, 80 lbs each, up to the roof, thirty rolls in all, up and down the stairs. Talk to me about this winter and I'll throw that summer back in your face and you'll shut up quick enough.

Jeremiah did two rolls for my one, though. I wasn't built for slave labor, being the runt of my litter, but Jeremiah's pollock-russian blood, true peasant stock, flowed in a body that was husky and thick, ideal for hauling sacks of potatoes to market or pulling ox-carts out of the mud. Maybe it was Jeremiah's consciousness of being descended from serfs bred for centuries to work some aristocrat's land that made him manic on the issue of freedom. Maybe it was an awareness that, if he let down his guard just a little, if he abandoned for a moment all his wild libertarian fantasies, he could very happily become somebody's perfect slave.

As if to prove this theory, Jeremiah turned six months of shit work for Shimkin into a crusade. He fixed every toilet, every broken window, every sink, and leaking faucet without authorization. Most of the tenants were old and poor and undoubtedly senile, but they loved us. They loved us. They cooked us lunch. They kept trying to slip us dollars they could hardly afford, and we kept turning them down. Mrs. Cantini, always bragging about her kids who lived in Jersey and would one day come and take her out of that place and far away from that "sominabitch" Shimkin, would find us on ladders and offer up bowls of pasta fagioli or lentil soup. Even Mrs. Meyerowitz, who we could smell was dying of cancer, started talking to us about Europe during the war and what she went through in the concentration camp.

Jeremiah lost people in those camps, distant relatives old Harry Jaffee never talked about. We'd listen closely to Mrs. Meyerowitz's ramblings, the very looseness of her story affecting us more deeply than those tailored recitations, studied over time and retellings, which passed for human history. Jeremiah would stop her when she grew too agitated or irrational in her tales, mingling times and places and people as they must have been mingled in her feeble memory. He told me later that her loss of context frightened him in a strange way.

"She talks to us just as if her mind were flickering out, like a candle at the end of its wax. And yet in my family, where there was tragedy like hers, too, there has been so much silence that we remember nothing. We resent her scars and resent her willingness to make them public. I'm afraid to let her talk herself out, because that's when it will be all over for her. That's when she will die."

Yes, Jeremiah was a fanatic about freedom and individual liberties. Some people back then thought you had to go to Vietnam to fight for freedom. Meanwhile, Jeremiah and I were fixing those old folks' toilets and chasing junkies out of their hallways. "If you're not careful,"

Jeremiah said once, "You can let just enough hunger for freedom spill out of your heart, and that's when the concentration camp starts to take its place. And you'll carry that camp inside you all your life, living under self-imposed constraints as if some psychotic camp guard were at your back constantly."

In fact, this is the very subject Jeremiah chose to discuss on Ward's radio show, heard on short wave throughout the world.

Up on the Fifth Street roof I showed Jeremiah and Dionysia, the waitress from across the street, the poem Meyer the dwarf handed me outside the Blue Eye, written in pencil on the back of a handout:

### The Old Man

He lives somewhere in the dark  
 under the sewers and below the roots  
 of the oldest trees. He has dogs,  
 white and blind, that guard him.  
 He has taken many lovers for,  
 in spite of being a dwarf,  
 he has a giant's appetite for love.  
 He has gold and diamonds and rubies  
 down there, a great treasure  
 from which it is said he will care for  
 all dwarfs and midgets and abnormalities  
 like myself, who find themselves without resources.  
 It is said the Old Man is so lonely  
 in spite of his treasure and his lovers and his dogs  
 that he takes on his shoulders the loneliness of all freaks,  
 which weighs him down. It weighs him down.  
 I wonder, how can the Old Man be so great  
 and so lonely, all at once?  
 Is loneliness that powerful?  
 I am a dwarf and large ideas are unwieldy for me.  
 Consequently, I don't know if I'll ever understand very much  
 about the Old Man. But He's mine to believe in,  
 that's all.

"That's so sad," said Dionysia. "Imagine, being born a dwarf."

Dionysia kept her dark hair in one thick braid running down her back. We came to know her from taking our lunch across 2nd Avenue and sometimes she brought lunch up to us on her day off. She also liked to watch the NYU girls undress in the performing arts school across the street. We could see them through the locker room windows from the roof. Watching them



change made her incredibly horny and how could Jeremiah and I be so callous as to leave such an attractive woman in distress. That was back in the ancient days when it was safe to screw, back when parents had to think twice before answering their kid's "Why not?", way, way back when a little healthy promiscuity had a place in the general culture.

Nowadays, I'm long past caring if my dick ever finds itself a hot cunt again. But I often wonder about those who have the misfortune of being young and nubile in this day and age. They all might as well be like Ward or Meyer or Celeste or even like Meyer's Old Man and his blind white dogs stuck a million miles under the earth. Back then nobody had to wax eloquent about the virtues of passion; it was all understood and simply enjoyed. Now, if anyone finds out you want sex, you'll be taken for a suicidal misfit. Not then, mind you. Not that hot August on the Fifth Street roof after a snack of falafels and tahini with stray wisps of beansprouts clinging to Dionysia's long dark braid.

"It must be so sad for him," Dionysia sighed. "To be so sensitive ... and a dwarf."

Jeremiah stroked his beard and squinted thoughtfully at the waitress as she arranged her skirt. "I'll tell you what, Dionysia," he said, "how would you like to help the little guy out?"

After Jeremiah got to know Cassandra Sharpe really well, he could bring me up to her place with him. I was very much surprised to find her dressing table turned into an altar with candles and crystals and all sorts of fetishes made out of shells or feathers any sort of crap one happens to come across during the course of a day. Each piece, however, had been endowed by Cassie with special mystical importance. It was as normal for her to light incense at her altar as it was for her to make interminable lists of "things to do, things to be done" or check the waiter's addition in a restaurant even if she wasn't paying the tab. I suppose it was her almost manic practicality and business sense that helped her make the most out of her psychic gifts. She was never the sort of person to allow such gifts to degenerate into glitzy sentimentality, and she held all those trendy soothsayers, psychics, channelers, etc., who were out to make a buck, in utter contempt. Frankly, I think she was as nutty as the rest of them, but who am I to cast stones. Jeremiah was in love and if he was happy, I was happy.

Besides, nutty or not, Cassie was a delight to be around.

"The gris-gris bag represents the union of black and white in magic," she explained to me, placing the brightly colored silk pouch in my hand. Like her altar, it, too, was filled with little bits of crap: beads, tiny mannequins made out of twisted wire, sequins, shards of stone and wood, etc. "It's especially powerful when it's made just for someone whom the maker holds in great esteem. In a way it's the witch's method of separating her power from herself and sharing it with another. When the gris-gris bag is given with full knowledge to someone, its power acts as a protective charm. It can just as easily be nailed onto someone's door anonymously and be an effective source of evil."

"I don't know that I feel too comfortable with all your talk of magic," I said. "I mean, I don't know if you're pulling my leg or if you're really into that stuff. And I don't know which case bothers me more. My friend Jean Luc's grandfather freaks out about gris-gris bags and voodoo. I wrote that off as Louisiana ignorance. But I respect your intelligence and now I'm sort of worried."

Cassie laughed in a way that told me she found me charming, and that made me feel better. She had this nurturing way about her which actually made me want to take her breast in my mouth and nurse, not just twiddle her nipple. I knew soon enough that I'd fall in love with her too, in spite of being Jeremiah's friend, but the energies she gave off were simply too powerful for me. I didn't then, and don't now, have the temperament to deal with a woman like Cassandra Sharpe. Jeremiah did, however. Their lunacies complemented each other's quite nicely.

When he ran for President, Cassie was Jeremiah's deepest, darkest secret.

It was on Ward's pirate radio station that night that candidate Jaffee proposed the Io project.

It created quite a stir.

"You see, Ward," said Jeremiah, "the Voyager mission showed us that Jupiter's moon, Io, is a highly thermo-active satellite. What we need to do, both as a nation and a world, is to establish a power convergence plant in the vicinity of Io that will transform all that thermal energy into laser-like beams which could then be collected by a colony on our moon and beamed down to Earth, providing the world with limitless sources of free energy."

You should have seen Ward grin. He had Jeremiah pegged for a nut right away, but a man who's a talking head living with a monkey and running a pirate radio show out of his studio apartment on the Upper West Side could be expected to find such nuts good company.

"Isn't that an unnecessarily elaborate scheme for the solution of Earth's energy needs, Mr. Jaffee? We haven't nearly accomplished all we can in regard to tapping our own resources here on Earth, like tidal and solar energy, and wind power, and even thermal energy from volcanoes and hot springs."

"Well, that's precisely my point, Ward--and please, call me Jeremiah--we, as a species, keep looking down at the ends of our noses for solutions to the problems of life, when we should be looking up at the stars. That's where the answers to all our questions about ourselves and our place in the universe will be solved. If you look at your nose long enough, your eyes will soon be too crossed for you to walk straight. If, on the other hand, you keep your vision focused on the broad spectacle of the universe, your feet will take you on their own volition along the straight and seamless path to Enlightenment. That's how you and I learned to walk, by focusing

far enough ahead that our individual steps seem to come out of nowhere, step after step, and bingo, the journey's begun . . ."

Eddie picked his ass, nodding like a CEO.

"The end result, then," Jeremiah continued, "would of course be that, if the people of the world took it upon themselves to pursue the Io Project, naturally, the earliest steps would be to maximize our own planetary usage of energy, in order to stockpile the resources necessary to make the Io Project a reality. All those seemingly miraculous achievements, like saving our environment, attaining world peace and a world government, and rising above ourselves to become the next step in human evolution, all of these desired ends which could not be achieved when perceived as ends, will be quickly accomplished when they are seen as merely the first teetering steps toward a far vaster project. It will be good for our species to unite in a cause whose struggle will last a thousand years. One of those positive struggles, may I point out, that's not a war."

Jeremiah went on to explain the series of boosting units strung through space from Io to the Moon. There would be colony craft in highly-complex orbits to maintain the system, and each colony would be a unique experiment in adaptive living. Once the limitless energy of the Io system were made available to Earth, the process of fusion power would become economical and would probably be developed along with Io beam, itself. The next step could then be the accessing of Jupiter's electrical storms and tidal gases for power, because a swirling mass of gas with a diamond core isn't worth much of anything in and of itself, is it?

And on and on until nobody knew what he was talking about.

"In other words," said Ward, "and let's be frank, what you are really telling me is that the Io Project would be a psychological ploy toward the creation of new initiatives in economic

development? That the people of the world won't achieve what they need to here without looking at the Great Way Beyond to inspire them to it?"

"Well, you're absolutely right that it is a psychological ploy. I'll freely admit it. But it's a ploy that will work. And why not? The human species never attained its greatest heights without a deep almost racial focus on some great mystery beyond itself. In the beginning the mystery must have been God as Nature, the thunder and lightning and the stars in the sky. Then it was God as God, an abstraction to the intellect, yet capable of reaching down into our emotional depths and generating something overwhelmingly passionate and profound. And then it became God as the Universe, Itself, where each of us in our hearts and minds participate in the very central stuff of the Universe. That which is Without, is Within : and vice versa. You and I, Ward, are as much a part of the Crab Nebula as the wisps of gas and dust at its core. We just don't realize it. Our senses weren't designed to realize it, in the same way that an octopus in its natural habitat couldn't ever process the sensory data necessary for it to understand its place in the scheme of things. But we, homo sapiens, have made great strides in the 20th century. We are ready to make the leap to the next level."

And blah blah blah.

Ward's show had callers. One guy from Mott Street, an Oriental who spoke beautiful English, suggested that Jeremiah was a mystic with a dangerously shallow command of scientific jargon and that he was trying to bring about the philosophical union of mysticism and politics, which is impossible. An oxymoron, he called it. Another bright one said Jeremiah spoke like a fag. All those three syllable words, eh buddy? A third guy said that Jeremiah had it all wrong, that Jesus was the only answer. A fourth guy mainly supported Jeremiah, but he added that there

were certain non-human forces or beings which existed along with us in what we called the Universe, and that we couldn't complete our equations for the future without factoring them in.

That guy I liked. I learned to respect him and so did Jeremiah. The three of us became a triumvirate over time. We were great friends. Oddly enough, he lived on the shore of Lake Zoar, not far from the Cuahla School. Jeremiah found him almost as inspiring as Cassie in that she was an Earth Mother and he was a Lunar Father.

His name was Bo Lumen.

We first met Bo Lumen through D-J Case.

D-J's an interesting guy. He came to the school to get Celeste a job. Now, Celeste's so retarded her IQ isn't even on the scale. She walks on her toes like an infant only she's 19 years old, she still goes to the bathroom wherever and whenever, she chews on magazines instead of reading them, and sometimes, when you're not watching her carefully, she'll chew on her shit and smear it all over the walls.

I said to D-J shortly after we met, "Look, man. Why are you trying to make her go to work? She's got some pretty heavy shit to deal with as it is, I'd figure. This place is nice, it's in the woods, there are goddamn birds all over the place singing: why not let her just play in the sun and chew her magazines?"

"Don't think I don't see the logic to that," he said to me. "I know that if I didn't have to work for a living, I'd be doing things a bit differently, myself. But see, with me, I work to make money. I don't need to prove anything about myself to anybody. The paycheck does all the talking I need to hear. Now, with Celeste, it's different. She's the way she is partly because nobody's taken her seriously as a person since she was a child. I have this gut feeling that if Celeste is taken seriously for a significant period of time, she'll be lots more fun to be around. It's just a gut feeling, but it's a feeling that comes over me when I think about myself, about most people. You know: society in general. If someone takes you seriously, really seriously, you grow. If nobody does, you don't grow. Now, the quickest way to get people to start taking Celeste seriously is to get her a job with a paycheck attached, work with her, train her, and record her growth in terms that anybody can appreciate. I like videotape for that, myself. And



you keep your fingers crossed that as Celeste grows bit by bit, as she stops chewing magazines and smearing shit, somebody'll start taking her seriously, latch onto her and help her make a dignified life for herself. She's lucky in that her mother has come back into her life and through God-knows-what transformation, seems to care for her. She's starting to take her seriously. I'm just here to give Mom the evidence: the next step will be hers. Frankly, I hope Celeste leaves the so-called working world and can get to travel around the world and to learn all that she's capable of learning and never see the inside of a factory or a workshop again. But first, somebody's got to take her real seriously."

And off they were in the car, D-J and Celeste, the strangest mixture of two people I had ever seen.

D-J took Jeremiah up the hill to the tree and stone and that's where we met Bo Lumen. Bo was a very quiet man, and the best way I can describe his features is to say that his face is the face behind every man's mask. Strip each of us of race and ethnicity and we will all be wearing Bo Lumen's face. I always found his face pleasant to look at, like the color green. He and D-J seemed to be very close. They always seemed to be genuinely glad to see each other and even long times away from each other were wiped out in seconds. They seemed to be in tune with the same ideas, the same feelings about the universe: an Oversoul, a plurality of dimensions, astral expansion of the human psyche, the Inside being the same as the Out, and crap like that, and sometimes I got the feeling they'd dance naked under the full moon with tom-toms given half the chance. Don't misunderstand: they weren't fags. And D-J's libido came closest to matching Jeremiah's of any man I knew. As for Bo, he gave me the impression that sex was a phase he'd grown out of. A quiet, alert, helpful kind of guy.

Damn if Lake Zoar didn't seem to breed odd people . . . I kicked myself up and along the curved spine of the tree and climbed onto the stone. I sat there for hours listening to them talk.

Hobart stood in the center of his living room, staring at the TV and thumbing the remote control. The channels wavered, flicked on, wavered again, flicked off, over and over. Each time the channels flipped, Hobart twitched his face to the right and to the left. He stared down at the screen, twitching, just like he was in a trance.

I thought I better call Jeremiah who lived upstairs but I decided to wait awhile and study Hobart's symptoms. He reminded me of one of the kids who lived at Cuahla School, an autistic kid named Lou Scarpetta. Lou would clap his hands to the side of his head, rock back and forth and talk to the wall. He carried conversations in his head that he had picked up throughout his life, like a mockingbird picking up bird calls. Lou's eyes would grow dreamy and shut way down while he rocked back and forth talking to his father or his mother or older brother, Sid. Sid also had whatever Lou had, talk about hard luck. Yet they had always been separated and never given a chance to grow up as brothers. I regretted that, as I got to know Lou, because he could have used a companion who could have not only tolerated but shared his strange ways.

Whatever brain parts were damaged in Lou's head, the same parts seemed to be malfunctioning in Hobart's. I walked up to him slowly, keeping my hands in front of me in case he decided to freak out. He didn't seem to know I was in the room until I stepped between him and the TV. His thumb stopped, but he kept looking right through me at the screen. "Hobart," I said, grabbing his shoulders, "it's time to wake up. Reality's knocking on your door."

I shook him and tried to pin his eyes with mine. Gradually, his eyes began to focus on the real world and he lurched toward the TV as if he could walk through me. "Whoa," I said, keeping him upright, "don't move around until the blood flows back into your head."

"Jesus Christ!" he said, "You're not going to believe this. I don't believe this. It's like being in a time warp where you're stuck making one move over and over again, forever . . ."

"Hobart," I said, "sit down. I don't know what you've been smoking but you're ok now, so I want you to sit right down over here and I'm going to get Jeremiah because he told me he wanted to talk to you about something. Now, don't go anywhere while I'm gone, I'll just be a couple of minutes."

No sooner had I said that than I thought better of it and said, "No, I'm not taking any chances. *We* are going to find Jeremiah."

The Candidate's apartment was getting more surrealistic every day. New puppets seemed to be sprouting from the walls like exotic fruit, a pirate and a woodsman and an old Chinese sage he called "Master Wu." There were candles all over the place in assorted colors and lengths, giving off the smell of incense and burnt wax. Paperwork was scattered in piles around the apartment, along with bills and receipts, each stack bearing the weight of a different candle. The mirror Cassie gave him reflected the candles' flames, appearing to the casual observer as to be, in reality, a porthole opening onto the intergalactic birthplace of lush stars. The mirror had a crack in it running from lower left to upper right and she said it was soaked with astral vibrations. Each room was painted a different color so that if you stood in the kitchen and looked down the four of them, it seemed like a rainbow. Jeremiah sat cross-legged on a cushion in front of his work table, carving a new puppet. His stick collection hung on a rack over the work table.

"Jeremiah," I said, "Hobart seems to have had an . . . an . . . *experience*."

"Man," Hobart chimed in, "you're not going to believe this but I thought I was lost for good . . ."

To make a long story short it had something to do with the remote control becoming a time-transference device right there in his hand. Each time he tried to change the channel he'd be bounced back in time to the very second he decided to change the channel. To make things worse, the show he was trying to turn off was Wheel of Fortune and there was Vanna - crossing the stage, turning over the letter 'B', crossing her hands in front of her pussy, clapping, crossing the stage, turning over the letter 'B', crossing her hands in front of her pussy - over and over again.

"I felt like I was trapped in Hell," he said.

Jeremiah sat him down and turned on some Japanese flute music. "What new herbal delights have you been tormenting your corpus callosum with this week?" he asked.

Hobart turned paler than his usual fishbelly tone. His dark eyes narrowed. "You don't think it could be that?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Jeremiah. "They're doing amazing things these days with bio-engineering."

"Needham said it was called 'Blue Lotus', something he heard a lot of talk about on the West Coast."

"Is it treated?"

"No, of course not. At least not that I know of. You know, Needham's been acting strangely lately. Like he's keeping this big secret from everybody. I wonder . . ."

"I'd stay away from the stuff, if I were you," Jeremiah concluded, turning back to his puppet. "There's getting to be less and less quality assurance in that agribusiness. I may be campaigning to legalize the stuff, but that doesn't mean people should use it. Not today, anyway, unless you grow it in your backyard and know exactly what's in it."

"I've got to talk to Needham," said Hobart, making for the door. "See you."

"Wheel of Fortune?" Jeremiah said after he left. "Good thing you came around when you did. You probably saved his life."

We were having a few drinks with Bo in his cabin on Lake Zoar when Jeremiah told the dream to us:

"I'm standing on the beach looking out over the ocean. The sun sets and the sky darkens into bands of twilight colors, beautiful mauves and magentas, only the streaks are vertical, not horizontal as a normal sunset. As the sky continues to darken, the streaks all fade into the night and stars appear: a large square of four stars hangs close to the horizon, and directly above it a circle of stars, I don't know how many, I don't remember counting them in the dream. I remember, though, that I was overwhelmed by the beauty of that sky. Suddenly, as I'm staring up at them, the stars start to move. The circle turns on its axis, just like a huge Ferris wheel and the square seems to turn toward me, as if I were watching a carousel from a long distance. I remember then feeling hysterically happy that I was being granted that vision. The Ferris wheel and the carousel, the circle and the square. Thanks to the motions of the stars, everything in the universe seemed to have been united in one vast dance that was endless, and endlessly beautiful. All the opposites on Heaven and Earth seemed to be reconciled.

"It was quite a dream..."

"I had a dream involving circles once," Bo said. "It turned out to be a nightmare that repeated itself several times over the course of six months. You have to understand a little about Lake Zoar environs, though, to appreciate the dream's significance. I moved here over ten years ago while I was investigating a UFO sighting. I wasn't looking for extraterrestrial invaders; rather, I was looking for some 20th century Captain Nemo. I had suspected for some years that a vast pool of American ingenuity had to have been functioning in a manner I could almost

characterize as 'underground'. I couldn't accept the fact that the world's leadership was the way it was because it had to be: that there weren't fine examples of human genius hard at work pushing technology to its limits, so far to its limits that it was falling right into the lap of the spiritual . . .

"There have been more sightings of UFOs in the Lake Zoar area than anywhere in the world. They rarely get reported, however. The townspeople of Tolbrook and McClellan Heights seem to have made a pact with these 'visions'. To attract the world's attention to their private miracles seems almost sacrilegious to them, and now that I'm one of them, I quite agree.

"There's no Capt. Nemo and no extra-terrestrials."

Bo paused as if to pick out a glimmer of Lake Zoar from behind the lamp's reflection on the bay window.

"The situation's quite different. Quite remarkable."

He was smiling.

"But getting back to the dream: I had walked along the lake to French's Cove and was standing at its landward tip watching the constellation Scorpio brightening on the horizon. Suddenly, the sky seems to rip open and I'm looking past our universe into a place with a darker night, a much blacker and inkier night. Five lights seem to blossom out of the darkness and hover in formation in the hole. They form a vast quincunx in the sky, a 'quincunx' being the five as you see it on dice, a square with a dot in the middle. In my dream I remain more analytical than startled and I ask myself, 'What can that mean?'

"Then the lights seem to fall down at me, so quickly and suddenly that I have the sensation that I'm really falling up toward them. Then I wake up in a cold sweat.

"I had that dream off and on, as I said, for six months. The lights are round but nothing like flying saucers or anything tangible or mechanical. They seem to be nothing other than the



bottoms of light-cones, the points stretching away from me out to infinity. They hover above me and suddenly pass right through me, right through my mind, and there I am awake in bed in a cold sweat."

I sure as hell didn't know what to say about that dream except that it gave me the creeps. So I didn't say anything. We were all quiet for awhile.

Then Jeremiah asked, "Are you sure it's just a dream?"

Bo smiled. "What else could it be?"

"I'm not sure," Jeremiah said. "But ever since Cassandra's been bringing me up here, I've noticed there's something strange about the place. I can't quite put my finger on it, though. It's not a bad feeling I get: just the opposite. I like being here. I find the strangeness of the place somehow congenial."

"I felt the same way when I first came up here," Bo said. "That's why I moved here. In ten years I've never stopped feeling the presence of something special in the air here, something that's just waiting for the right time to reveal its secret."

"In ten years," Jeremiah said, "no other tangible clues?"

"Yes, there have been more clues, but I don't know if I'd quite call them 'tangible'."

Bo poured more wine.

"We know a place with a sign like that in the city," I offered. "That 'quincunx.'"

Don't laugh. It's not an easy word to say.

"Yes, it's a half-way house for runaways on the Minnesota Strip. It's right across from the Blue Eye," I added. "Now I know why the priest who runs it calls it the Q club. I thought the association was with pool. You know, a Catholic priest trying to be hip."

"The Blue Eye?" asked Bo.

"A strip-joint," said Jeremiah. "Though in its way it's as different from its environs as Lake Zoar is from the rest of the planet."

Bo settled back in his chair. "Well, well," he said, "you gentlemen will have to take me there sometime, won't you? Strictly in the interests of science."

"It'll be our pleasure," said Jeremiah. "You have to see Cassandra on stage."

"Really? She's very beautiful."

"I'll be very honest with you," said Jeremiah. "It's not just beauty; it's some kind of magic. We haven't been together long, but I know that she's pulling me toward her from among all the creatures crawling around in that city. Maybe this lake will help me understand her kind of magic."

"I guarantee you that Zoar will help you understand many things. You will go back to the city refreshed and ready to conquer the world. You have come to the lake at a very good time to be enlightened."

"How so?"

"I'm not quite sure. But I feel the energies around here growing stronger recently. Much more intense and compelling."

"Since when?" Jeremiah asked.

"Why, since Miss Cuahla opened her school."

Harry Hull took quite a beating but he made his point. He left Smitty the pimp on his knees, kneeling against the wagon-wheels of Nikos' souvlaki stand, trying to pull himself up to his feet.

Harry was none too pretty, either, but at least he was upright. "Stay away from her, cocksucker," he warned Smitty. "Stay away from all the kids."

"She came to me, man," Smitty sniffled through the blood.

"She's a disease to you, man," said Harry, "a deadly disease, a disease from which there's no recovery. If she comes to you, remember that. She's pretty and she can be lots of fun and you can make money off her, but for you, Smitty, she's gonna be stomach cancer. I'm right behind her, you asshole. Whether you talk her out of wanting me there or not. It's not her choice, Smitty. She's gonna know that just like you're gonna know it. So if she comes around, you treat her like the plague."

Then he went back across the street and into the door with the sign of the blue quincunx over it. He dragged Annie Crystal by the wrist and pulled her with him.

That Annie was a wild bitch. On the street since she was ten, she migrated from some farm town upstate because she got tired of the yelling and screaming, and because she read a book about hobos on the futz, living by their wits and their luck. If anybody was born to live a life on the futz, it was Annie Crystal. She didn't like the fact that Harry interfered with her life, not one bit. But at the same time, the way he kept fighting to protect her, getting his hair pulled and his back raked bloody by Smitty's sharp fag nails but kept on at him anyway until he laid him out all up and down the Strip, that impressed her too, I'm sure.

Maybe she was falling in love.

Meyer the dwarf sent over to help Smitty to his feet, but Smitty swung at him. "Get outta my way, you freak," he cursed, then walked quickly into the Blue Eye. Back in those days I didn't know much about Harry Hull, so I started to worry for his safety. No pimp takes a good beating lying down. But I soon learned Harry could handle himself.

"Meyer," I said, "that was a beautiful poem."

I didn't think Meyer heard me. He kept staring at the door that had swallowed the pimp with that look of frustrated rage that Jeremiah had captured so perfectly on his latest puppet. That a scumbag pimp should call him a freak.

"Meyer," I said, "why do you even bother to help assholes like him?"

A dwarf is twice cursed: his body is deformed, and his bloated face strips the secrets from his heart. The fire in his eyes burned out and his shoulders drooped.

"So you liked the poem?" he asked.

"Yeah, I did."

Meyer cracked a smile. "It's the Irish blood of a poet that's in me," he said.

"Maybe you're a leprechaun, then," I said. "Not a dwarf."

I looked across the street and saw Harry Hull storming uptown. Father Terry came flying out after him. He caught up to him at the next block and they both kept walking, deeply involved in conversation. That put the kibosh on the reason for my trip downtown: I intended to arrange a meeting between them and Jeremiah so Jeremiah could discuss some social programming ideas of his. By the looks of it I figured they would be gone for hours.

"Maybe," said Meyer. He shuffled the handouts between his stubby fingers. "But if so, then where's my pot of gold? Tell me that."

I shrugged. What can you say to a dwarf looking for a pot of gold?



Nobody laughs around this place. Sometimes I think Farber is laughing, but it sounds more like he's choking so I ring for the nurse. Naturally, no one shows up and soon Farber's asleep with this grin on his face like an open wound.

Granted, there's not much around here to laugh about. Everybody's in pain and destitute or else they'd be somewhere else. The outside world that I used to be so much a part of has become a distant vision, a memory of vague desires, of oddball parts fitting awkwardly into each other, of distorted dreams. In retrospect, laughter seems to have been the glue that held the parts of reality together, and now that laughter's gone, the world and all its intricate movements seem to be nothing more than a pointless dream.

The last time I laughed was Valentine's Day. Some retarded kids from a special school had made valentines for us old folks and were handing them out in the day room. I could still sit upright then, and I was trying to thank the poor misbegotten boy who handed me the colored paper smeared with glue and crayon but he didn't seem to notice me at all, he just floated from person to person around the room, his eyes never resting on anybody's face. When they had handed out all the valentines and started for the door, this one kid wearing double hearing aids saw the elevator door open. Obviously, this was something he had never seen before, a wall opening up and spitting out people. He was so thrilled by the mystery of it that he pointed at it and shrieked. Being stone deaf, the kid had no idea how loudly he shrieked but several of my old cell mates clutched their chests and others began to palsy in earnest. The kids' supervisors were visibly shaken and hustled them out the door with hasty apologies. As for me, I laughed. I couldn't help laughing, I couldn't stop laughing, and in moments I was in convulsions and had to

be shipped back up to my bed. Some of my more lucid cell mates thought I was laughing at their discomfiture, and I lost several friends because of this. So what. They are human wrecks anyway, just like me, and can't possibly sustain any friendships, just as I can't sustain friendships any more, not friendships in any real sense of the word. I don't have the interest or the stamina. The pain I deal with every day is too great.

But back in the old times friendships were heavily dosed with laughter. Jeremiah and Hobart were my favorite laughers. When they laughed, they laughed without self-consciousness or moderation. Some things struck them so funny that they were known to drop to floors or sidewalks in hysterics. There was this one time on the front stoop when Jeremiah delivered a punchline to a joke involving a second potato up someone's ass and the two of them dropped to the ground like they were shot. I was laughing just crossing the street to see what was going on.

Jeremiah had Ward Stevenson and Mike Slovaki going like that the night of the pirate radio broadcast. They were talking about the necessity for a sense of humor in this world, and the special need for one if you were running for the Presidency. Along these lines Jeremiah started talking about his father, Harry Jaffee.

"Sometime back in the 20's," said Jeremiah, "this guy owned a speakeasy and casino out in the Midwest. My dad, Harry, was on the road with his cousin, Benny, to cover their territory for a manufacturer of novelties and cheap crapola. I'll tell you right now there was then, and there is now, lots of money in crapola. Harry would have made out quite well for himself, except for this one compulsion of his which was gambling. And Benny was no better. In fact, if the family legends are true, it was Benny who set my dad on the road to ruin, a deed for which he did sufficient penance by dying of starvation in Florida as a destitute old man. Anyway, between the two of them, they could sniff out a crap game anywhere within a hundred miles. So there

they were, driving hell bent for leather through cornfields when they both hear the call of nature simultaneously. Well, as luck would have it, the only building within miles was this speakeasy. Harry and Benny run for the toilet and do their thing and when they emerge, the clatter of dice and the whirr of the roulette wheel were too much for them. A few hours later Harry was down \$65, the most expensive crap he ever took. That's when he had to pee. Now, Harry had no idea that the owner of the joint was infamous for his practical jokes. So when he stands at the urinal and notices the fly sitting on the smooth inner surface, he doesn't think twice about aiming for it. Well. It turns out that the fly was a gimmick that was implanted into the surface of the urinal and had a mild electric current running through it. Naturally, Harry blasts it head on and the jolt of current sends his balls to the roof of his mouth. He leaps back, pissing all over himself. There he is, without dignity, without decorum, in severe pain, and crumpled on the floor of the latrine, his pants soaked. He comes flying out of the toilet like a man possessed, hunting down the owner of the place. The bouncers usher him to the back office where this fat man with a pencil-thin mustache and diamond pinky-rings is sitting behind a desk. Benny dragged himself away from the crap table fearing that Harry was going to be tuned up by the bouncers, only to find him unleashing a flurry of invectives regarding the juvenile nature of the mobster's sense of humor. 'Mr. Jaffee, you're right, of course, I sometimes get carried away and fail to foresee the hurt I cause in pursuit of a quick laugh.' By this time the fat man has unfolded from his chair and attempts to pacify Harry with an arm around his shoulder and oily self-deprecating apologies. 'Of course, I'll pay for the suit and my managers will see to it that the bar tab's taken care of for both you and your friend. Please, sit down and cool off.' At which point he ushers my dad into a chair the legs of which promptly collapse, leaving him flat on his ass on the floor. The owner, the bouncers, Benny, all of them break up into uncontrollable laughter. And Harry had to break



down, as well, laughing at his own predicament until the tears rolled down his cheeks. The ultimate ludicrousness of the human condition had been revealed to him in all its glory, wiping away his shame and anger and any thought of revenge, dissolving the negativity into laughter and joy. Everybody's eyes were wet with raucous tears and handshakes and embraces were passed all around."

Seeing Ward laugh, too, was a special treat, that rollicking face seemingly sutured onto a dead body. Eddie the monkey started jumping around the room, barking. Mike said, "You gotta tell that one on my TV show."

It's gratifying to me now, at this stage of my life, to know that mine was part of that good old fashioned American laughter being heard over the short wave all the way to Vladivostok.

Could world peace be far behind?

Titty-who-can is the place of the gods. It's in Mexico. Jeremiah told me about a pyramid there called the pyramid of the sun. We were all on the roof that hot August afternoon, Jeremiah lifting weights, Hobart practicing the French horn, and me, drawing. I was drawing pyramids because in the stifling heat of the roof it was easy to think of Egypt or Mesopotamia or Mexico. I wondered if mummies could really come to life if someone said the right incantation. I wondered if the blood of human sacrifices made by the Aztecs left a karmic curse upon their civilization and that's why the Spaniards showed up and had a field day.

Christ, it was so hot I grew dizzy. I started drifting in and out of the sketches I was drawing. For a startling moment my pen was a quill. Then my fingers were the talons of a hawk. Then my soul seemed to leave my body in a vast uprush of hot dry wind and feathers.

Suddenly there was a scream.

Jeremiah was already over the parapet and heading down the fire-escape. I was still groggy and almost caught my balls on a shard of firebrick, but the continuous screaming activated my automatic pilot as I hustled to catch up to him. Hobart stayed back with Cassie, who had been watering her pots of bougainvillea and hibiscus. They kept an eye out for us, in case the police needed to be called.

Delia Villalobos had been feeding peanuts to the squirrels on the fire-escape, which is how the stranger had gotten into her apartment. He had her cornered in her bedroom, figuring to cash in on his good luck at finding the pretty woman home and turn a simple burglary into a party.

You should have seen his face when Jeremiah and I burst into the room behind him: utter slack-jawed terror. Like all cowards, the would-be rapist's confidence crumbled as soon as the jig was up, and he simply collapsed under Jeremiah's onslaught. Within seconds Jeremiah, a former wrestler, had the bastard wrapped up in a double chicken-wing.

Poor Delia was hysterical. She didn't know whether to keep shrieking from terror or from rage, so she did both. A torrent of Spanish invective mingled with her sobs and, now that the intruder was trapped, she ran around the apartment looking for a hammer to bludgeon him with or a blade to chop off his *cojones*.

"O brother," Jeremiah said to his prisoner, "you're in for it now. She's really pissed."

"Delia," I called out to her, "what do you want to do with this guy?"

There were so many things she wanted to do to him that she couldn't say them all at the same time, so her response was unintelligible.

"I've got an idea," said Jeremiah. "Let's bring the sonofabitch to the roof."

Jeremiah dragged him into the elevator and bent him so far over for the ride up that the bastard could almost have blown himself. When we got to the sixth floor, we hustled him up the access stairs and right over to the parapet. With a deft lurch, Jeremiah had him hanging over the edge, holding him by his knees.

Now it was the scumbag's turn to scream.

"Don't move around so much," Jeremiah spoke down to him. "I can feel my arms getting weak."

"No man, no, for god's sake don't drop me, lemme go, I'll never come back again, never, man, I promise . . ."

Etc. None of us were impressed.

Suddenly Officer Solomon appeared in a window across the alley, his revolver drawn and leveled.

"What's goin' on?" he called out.

"We caught this guy attempting to rape Delia on the second floor," Jeremiah called back.

"Do you want us to hold him for you?"

Solomon thought it over. "I don't know, Jeremiah," he said. "We're pretty crowded over at the 26th right now. I don't think my captain would like me bringing one more asshole in that we'll have to feed and take care of."

"I see your point," said Jeremiah. "Well, I'll just hang onto him until you come up with some other options."

"You sure you can hang onto him for awhile?" Solomon said back. "I mean, it'll take time to figure this situation out. I may have to put a call into the precinct."

"I think I can hold him for awhile. If he doesn't move around too much, that is." Jeremiah looked down at the bastard trying to dig his fingers into solid brick. "You won't move around too much, will you?"

"O God no man I won't move at all I'm still as a mouse, man, don't drop me for God's sake . . ."

"Not to belabor a theological point," Jeremiah called out to Solomon, "but where is God in their hearts when these pricks start climbing into windows and attacking people? I don't expect an answer, of course. It's just a theoretical question."

"Beats me," Solomon called back. "I'm coming over now. I think I'll call the captain from Delia's place. Think she'll let me use her phone?"

"I'm sure of it. Maybe she'll make you a cup of coffee, too. Take your time. There's no rush."

"O God, man!" the intruder yelled out. "You gotta come and arrest me! Now! This guy's crazy!"

"Hey," said Solomon, "is that any way to talk about the guy who's standing between you and certain death?"

"Some people have no gratitude in their hearts," said Jeremiah.

Then I had a brainstorm. I went down to Delia's place to hug her a little and use her phone. Solomon showed up and sat with her at the kitchen table over a cup of coffee. He took out his book and said, "I'll need all the details, Delia, for my report. Now let's see . . ."

My phone calls paid off and within fifteen minutes the alley was crawling with network newscasters. I gave them a brief bio on Candidate Jaffee and helped them set up their equipment in the most suitable spots for good coverage.

"Can we get a camera onto the roof without shaking things up?" one of the techs asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "It's sort of touchy up there. I'll find out. Hey, Jeremiah!" I called up from the alley, "these guys want to know if it's ok for them to come up and interview you."

"No problem," Jeremiah hollered down, "the American public has the right to be completely informed on all issues involving the common weal."

The tech scratched his head then hustled up to the roof with a camera, the sound man and the reporter. Once on the roof they paused in disbelief at the composite portrait of Hobart with his French horn, Cassie and her plants, and Jeremiah bent over the parapet, a sneakered foot in front of each ear.

The reporter held out a microphone toward Jeremiah. His face was all pimply which he tried to hide behind thick pancake make-up.

"We've been told you're running a maverick campaign for the Presidency of the United States," he said. "Is this some sort of publicity stunt?"

"Not at all," said Jeremiah. "This is an attempted burglary and rape. My astute young colleague has simply converted it into a publicity stunt."

"Do you plan on holding that guy until the police get here, or are you going to drop him?"

*Madre Deosa* I heard the hanging bastard whisper.

"Well, I'm doing my best to hold the prick for the cops, but one can never be sure how these things work themselves out."

"If you do hand him over to the police, do you think the legal system will bring him to justice?"

"That's a good question," said Jeremiah. "Most likely he'll be back on the street within 18 months none the worse for wear. Had he succeeded in doing what he attempted to do, we could have all been part of tomorrow's major tragedy: robbery, rape, slow torture, murder maybe, God knows what. Should that possible scenario be weighed against a mere 18 months of homosexual rape, drug abuse and the spread of AIDS in the Tombs? I'm not sure. To my way of thinking this sonofabitch deserves worse. That's why I've come to endorse capital punishment for murder and castration for rape. In fact, I've written a position paper on this very topic which I'll distribute to the gentlemen and ladies of the press after this ordeal is over. To be brief, however, I must tell you that I'm personally more concerned with the healing process of victims and their survivors, than with the rehabilitation of the criminal. It's common knowledge that a significant part of the healing process from the trauma inflicted by such crimes as murder and rape depends

on the victims' putting closure on the situation as soon as possible. Should family members choose to be merciful and opt for life imprisonment, let's say, that's all well and good. That's their right, and God bless them. Should a parent want, however, to go over the murderer of his child with a baseball bat, that, too, should be an option. As President, I promise my constituents that a full study of this matter will be conducted as soon as I enter office."

There they were, six and one half stories above the alley conducting a political interview with the suspended intruder now reduced to tears and babbling incoherence. Only in Titty-who-can can such miracles occur. The place of the gods.

"I don't know about getting elected President," said the reporter, "but tomorrow you're quite likely to be a national hero."

"Fuck being a hero," said Jeremiah. "This country chews up its heroes and spits them out. Take a guy like Neil Armstrong. He discovers that the proposed landing site on the moon has too many rocks, so he has to pick an alternate site with 10 seconds of fuel to spare. No margin for error. No button or switch that'll get his ass off the hot seat. And he does it. His voice doesn't even quiver over the radio.

"Twenty years later he's selling cars on TV.

"Spare me your hero-worship. Our society sucks the blood out of its heroes, trivializes them, makes them sideshow spectacles. That's how we treat our heroes. No wonder the nobodies of this nation, the kids right here in Morningside Heights or Harlem, don't have a chance."

Finally, Officer Solomon showed up. The reporter and camera crew made way for him.

"Well, Jeremiah," he said, "here I am."

Jeremiah threw his arms wide apart. Six and a half stories below there was a crack, a muffled groan and a spreading red stain.

"Oops," said Jeremiah, rubbing the stiffness and red creases out of his arms, "I did my best but I couldn't hold him any longer."

"O well," said Solomon, "these things happen."



Knight of swords, 10 of wands, 4 of swords.

Cassie read the cards from top to bottom. "This tells me that you need to protect yourself," she said. "A conflict will arise in your life, very soon, that will oppress you terribly. Ultimately, you will resolve the conflict, but at a great expense of personal energy." Her fingertips strayed gently over the surface of the cards. "I think I know what to do."

We were in her dressing room at the Blue Eye. She kept mementos of Jeremiah on her mirror, a photo, a couple of poems he wrote her, an ink-and-water sketch of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight he had done. From a box decorated with feathers and sequins she took out several plastic bags of herbs.

"What I want you to do," she explained, "is take the mixture I'm going to prepare for you back to your apartment and burn it. Wait for the third star to emerge after sunset."

"What are they?"

"Urva oris, lavender, raspberry, myrrh, and pipsissewa," she said, putting clumps in a mortar and pestle and grinding them up.

"What happens when I burn it?"

"The scent calls up your guardian angels and encourages them to keep a special eye on you."

"No shit," I remarked.

Until Jeremiah and I started hanging out with Cassandra, I think it's safe to say we were both pretty level-headed about life in general. As far as I was concerned, burning herbs and candles to make magic was a lot of Squishead malarkey. And Jeremiah, with all his discussions about quantum this and electromagnetic that, wasn't about to sacrifice his intellectual integrity

over a pretty piece of ass. Or was he? At first I wasn't sure. Then Cassie began to get to me, too.

She definitely had an uplifting effect on people. Just being around her made me feel energized. And she had this absolute fetish about plants and animals. She could make bird noises that attracted every variety of pigeon, seagull and sparrow to eat right out of her hand. I saw her once on the roof, her arms out from her sides and covered with pigeons. And there wasn't an abandoned puppy or mangy kitten that she didn't nurse to health and find a home for. Her apartment was filled with plants, particularly begonias and ivies, and she started filling up what little space was left amidst Jeremiah's mess with bonsai and low-light jades. There was definitely something that set Cassandra apart from other women and, if whatever it was was magic, then I was all for it.

"I don't know, Cassie," I said, sniffing her concoction. "You know how I find all this stuff a bit hard to take."

"I know," she said. "Trust me."

She stood up, turned around and took off her t-shirt.

"Now please excuse me while I get into costume," she said, and I hurried out the door.

I did it, too. I burned that crap back at my place as soon as that third star came out.

As things turned out, I'm lucky it worked.

"I'm losing a day's pay because of this schmuck," the cabbie whispered.

"What outfit do you drive for?" Jeremiah asked.

"Sazeech Operating."

"Yeah? I drive occasionally for K-Y Systems. It's not a bad outfit. Every cab has the rooflight rigged so it's easy to make a little extra off the books."

What a crew filled the courtroom. If it were a movie set, I'd swear central casting was run by P. T. Barnum: hookers in mini-skirts and outlandish wigs, soldier-of-fortune types in full camouflage regalia carrying signs in support of Jeremiah, a healthy representation of the counter-culture set in tie-dye t-shirts carrying long-stem daffodils, an immense press contingent discussing career moves in whispers while they waited for Jeremiah's case to be called, and Meyer. I think Meyer was the only guy in the place wearing a suit: a blue suit with broad white pinstripes, a red tie with white polka-dots, and a straw hat. What a picture.

I settled my ass on the bench, ready for a long ordeal.

They finally called the cabbie to approach the bench and tell his story:

"Your Honor," he said, "I pick up the defendant down on Wall Street early this morning and he tells me he wants to go to some address in the Bronx. I tell him that I'm not familiar with the Bronx and ask if he can direct me. No problem, he says. Now, I've never been one to judge people by their clothing because I've been ripped off more by the suit-and-tie set than by down-and-outters. So I didn't think there'd be any problem taking this guy on such a long haul, even though it'd run him maybe 18 bucks. But once we were on our way up the Westside Highway, I got nervous because of the way he was babbling on and on about baseball and the Kennedys, like

he was on drugs or something, y'know, speed. I tried to talk sensibly to him, but somehow I just couldn't break the wall of nonsense he was spewing out. So I asked him point-blank if he had enough money on him to cover the trip. He tells me no, but I'd get paid by the people at our destination, and did I know that Bobby Kennedy had an illegitimate child by Lurleen Wallace. I asked him did he know the exact address in the Bronx and he said no, but he could find it if we drove around for awhile. That settled it, Your Honor. I could have pulled off the highway and dumped the guy, but he had already run up 8 bucks on the meter, which I would have had to eat. Besides, I haven't been working long with this cab company and I felt I should handle the situation by the book. So I lock the guy in the back seat with our safety lock switch and pull off the highway at 125th which happened to be right near my cab company. I drive right in with the guy in back and call out my boss. I tell him what happened and my boss asks to see this guy's money. Naturally, he's broke. Naturally, he's still babbling all kinds of nonsense, as if he weren't in the least bit of trouble. 'This guy's a nut,' my boss figures out, and then he gets in front with me and makes me drive to the 26th precinct to turn him in. 'I don't know, boss,' I said, 'don't you think getting the cops involved is a little extreme?' He says, 'We can't let these bums think they can get away with stuff like this.' So there we are at the 26th, the defendant gets hustled out of the cab and into the station house where he's assigned an arresting officer. He's put into the lock-up and the officer comes over to me to fill out the report. By this time my boss is long gone and I can see a rather bleak day stretching ahead of me, so the officer and I just kind of bullshit awhile, if you'll pardon the expression. Suddenly, this other cop, uh, officer, comes out from the lock-up and asks whose prisoner that was. The officer says it was his. 'Well, you better go in there and keep an eye on him, he just tried to hang himself with his shoelaces,' he says. 'O for Chrissake,' said the officer and he disappears in back. When the wagon finally arrives to bring

us downtown, the officer and the prisoner both come out of the lock-up soaking wet. 'What the hell happened?' I asked, and the officer says, 'He tried to escape by flushing himself down the toilet.'"

At this the whole courtroom broke up. Naturally, the judge pounded on the bench with his gavel.

"That's the story, Your Honor," said the cabbie. "They brought us down here and here we are."

He sat back down next to Jeremiah.

The public defender stood up and said, "Your Honor, I request a postponement of this case because of my inability to communicate with my client."

At which point the defendant rises to his feet. "Your Honor," he says, "may I address the bench?"

His lawyer gets real nervous at this and starts to motion the guy to his seat, but the judge, smiling indulgently, tells him to go ahead.

"Your Honor," he says, "if I am allowed to live, I can reveal secrets of great power to the government . . ."

BANG goes the gavel, and the judge says, "Bellevue, 60 days observation, next case."

The cabbie starts to beat it for the door and Jeremiah leans over to him and says, "Man, you had a hard day at the office."

"You're not kidding."

"Listen, when I'm elected President, I'll hire you as my chauffeur."

The cabbie stares wide-eyed at Jeremiah like he'd been dumped into the middle of National Nut Week. I give the cabbie the ok high-sign like his future is secure. I swear, the poor sonofabitch practically ran out of the courtroom.

Jeremiah's lawyer motioned for him to join him. Jeremiah stood up and took a deep breath.

"Tough act to follow," he said.

The Slovaki brothers were quite a trio. I won't insult them by calling them fat, but I'll simply point out that they didn't even try to ride the subways during rush hours. This was ok, however, because their lifestyles were such that none of them lived according to normal patterns of behavior in terms of waking, sleeping, working, and, especially, eating. I suppose their individualism accounted for their charm and there's no question that, once they set their minds to a project, they hung in for the duration. Personally, I had a lot of respect for them.

They considered Jeremiah's candidacy a *cause celebre*. Not many people would have back in the early days. It was also a vehicle whereby they could bring fresh life to their ailing public access TV show, so they wanted to play it up to the hilt. They planned to vindicate Jeremiah by inviting members of the radical press to interview him regarding his arraignment and his political philosophy in general.

Jeremiah, however, had other plans.

Even though Jeremiah did construction work and drove a cab to help pay the bills, he was deep down a puppeteer. His favorite work involved puppet shows that entertained not only kids but the adults who paid the tab. Building puppets and making them come alive fulfilled his creative urges like no other activity, not even "burning herbs" with Cassandra Sharpe. "Burning herbs" of course was Jeremiah's way of politely phrasing the verb, "to fuck." When he said, for example, "Well, Cassandra and I are going to burn some herbs, now," Hobart and I and anyone else in Jeremiah's apartment would take the hint and hit the road. Friends don't have to be subtle with each other. But even "burning herbs" played second fiddle to the flow of Jeremiah's puppeteer juices.

Instead of talking to reporters, Jeremiah wanted to tell the story of his arraignment in his own way. He and the Slovaki clan put on a puppet show.

The judge was played by W. C. Fields. The prosecution, a spider. The defense, a satyr. The grand jury was Master Wu and a three-headed dragon.

Jeremiah was the unicorn.

### **Spider**

(Approaching the bench) Your Honor, the people hope today to strengthen the resolve of all decent citizens to adhere to what is considered by most enlightened nations to be the bulwark of humanistic social functioning, namely the rule of law. We will demonstrate that, regardless of the heinousness of the act of poisoning a river upon which all local life depends, it is not the purview of any one creature to take the law into his own hands and act as both judge and jury in the apprehension of, and disposition of, the late Mr. Poisonous Snake. We will prove that the defendant, Mr. Unicorn, did in fact willfully disregard that due process of law which makes our country great, and wantonly killed Mr. Snake after admittedly apprehending him in the midst of the alleged commission of a capital crime.

### **Unicorn**

(Being restrained by the satyr) Alleged! Willful disregard! A pack of lies!

### **W. C.**

Here, here! Calm yourself, I say! This is a court of Law.

### **Satyr**

We beg the court's indulgence, your honor.

### **Spider**

If I may continue. That Mr. Unicorn did apprehend said Snake and transport him to the very pinnacle of Windy Cliff and held him aloft for a considerable period of time to psychologically torment him and then did, at his pleasure, release said Snake and watched him plummet to the rocks below.

### **Unicorn**

He bit me! So I dropped him.



**Spider**

Hah! Your Honor, the act was witnessed by hundreds of bystanders. Once he was hanging over the cliff, Mr. Snake did not once offer violence to his captor. Indeed, he was heard to plead to be turned over to the legitimate forces of the law.

**Satyr**

Your Honor, no evidence to that effect has yet been admitted into the record. (Waving sheaf of papers) We intend, Your Honor, to demonstrate through sworn depositions obtained from every one of the witnesses at the scene, as well as from the constable present, that Mr. Snake did bite and struggle to free himself at the very moment that Mr. Unicorn was returning the felon to custody, a felon, I might add, who had so taken advantage of the law's past leniency that he had been apprehended in other circumstances three times before for poisoning the river.

**Spider**

You have such depositions? Your Honor, I smell a conspiracy of silence.

**Unicorn**

(Attempting to bop Spider with a club) Accuse my neighbors of lying under oath, eh? I'll show you . . .

**Spider**

Help! Help!

**Unicorn**

You call yourself a patriot!

**Satyr**

(Restraining Unicorn) Really, Your Honor, can you blame this hero for his rage against unjustified aspersions cast upon his honor and integrity. He has saved, almost singlehandedly, hundreds of lives and has earned the undying gratitude of all his fellow creatures who can, once more, drink from the river without fear of jaundice and bellybloat and slow, painful descent into the irretrievable blackness of death. Are we to sacrifice a hero, a gentle and humble creature who has done no harm to his fellow creatures, who has risked his own well-being so that the suffering of others would be averted . . .

**Spider**

(Coming out from under the prosecutor's table) Your Honor, we have incontrovertible photographic evidence of Unicorn's self-serving grand-standing . . .

**Unicorn**

(Chasing Spider back under the tale with his club) You dare!

**W. C.**

(Banging his gavel) See here! We'll have none of this in our courtroom!

**Unicorn**

(Standing on the table beneath which Spider cowers) I apologize to the court, Your Honor. It's just that I tend to overreact when I am engaged in combat with the Anti-Christ. I'll try and control myself from this point on.

**W. C.**

Thank you, sir. That will be much appreciated by the court.

**Unicorn**

Not at all. (Returns to seat)

**Satyr**

Have you ever been poisoned, Your Honor? I have. It's not pretty. The degrading agony erupting from the center of your gut, forcing one to welcome death as a dear and kindly friend. The psychological scars, should one survive, that obsessive fear of drinking or eating anything ever again, that inability to trust even those closest to you, always fearful of another invasion upon your most secret and cloacal intimacies . . . Such horror, Your Honor, is exactly what Mr. Unicorn, my client, spared his fellow citizens. To condemn him as a malefactor in the process by straining the letter of an ambivalent and debatable statute is, to my common sense, unthinkable.

**Spider**

Your Honor, there are larger questions at hand . . .

**Master Wu**

(Bopping Spider with a club from the jury box) You call yourself a prosecutor? Then prosecute criminals!

### **Three-headed Dragon**

(Likewise bopping Spider with a club) Free the Unicorn. He's a national hero. Erect a monument to his valor and let his name shine in an aureole of glory as his deeds deserve!

**W. C.**

(Banging gavel) Case dismissed!!!

And that's how it went. Sort of.

We watched D-J teach her to make buttons.

First, she had to hold the end of the pin in her left hand. This was tough for her because she was so retarded she didn't even have what D-J called "pincer grasp", that is, the ability to hold something between your index finger and your thumb. A baby doesn't get "pincer grasp" until it's well along in its development, and Celeste's nerves stopped growing when she was about eight months old.

Second, you have to open the other end of the pin with your other hand. D-J said it took her months to work both hands simultaneously. Then, of course, she had to learn to aim the tip of her right index finger to come down just right on the pin and push it just enough to slide out from under the curved lip so it would open. "When you think about it, there are a lot of muscular and visual calculations that have to be made to do that," said D-J. "You and I don't notice them because our brains made all those calculations long ago, and stored them away for our use as needed. Unconsciously. Celeste wasn't that lucky. Every time she pushes on that pin, it's like learning to drive a shift. But she's getting it."

D-J touched her chin gently and turned her eyes to look into his. He gave her a big smile. "Good work," he said, and with his hands he signed, "good work."

"That's what I find amazing," he said. "That her mind can still grow. She can still learn and develop even though she's fully grown, and even though her mental apparatus is so malformed. Stimulate her, respect her as an equal, encourage her, and her mind develops. It's amazing. Take the most high-test supercomputer and fuck up just one set of circuits and the thing's worthless. And it can't get any better on its own. The human mind, on the other hand,

has this capacity to somehow transcend the stuff it's made of. I can't reach inside her head and fix anything, you see. But by being here for her, demonstrating things to her, she blossoms."

Third, she had to pick up the pin in her left hand and hold it so that the pointed stem could be directed at the hole in the button.

Fourth, and at the same time, she had to bring the button over to the pin. It had to be oriented just right so that the pin entered the proper hole.

Fifth, the pin had to be inserted and the hook inserted in the second hole.

Sixth, the pin and button had to be set down on the table, flat.

Seventh, she had to push the pointed stem under the hook, closing the button.

Eighth, she had to pick up the button and put it in the finished work bin.

"And she had to do all that," said D-J, "*and* not crap her pants, or jump up and run around, or throw her work, or grab a magazine to chew: all of that, mind you, with cognitive neural circuitry that's almost embryonic. I find it amazing."

We watched her be taken to the bathroom by an aide. When she walked, she stood on her toes.

"She deserves \$60 an hour," said D-J. "All things considered."

Johnny Gee lived on the low frequency end of the drug spectrum; Bill Needham lived on the high.

"I called him up," said Hobart, "and told him I had a few questions about Blue Lotus. I told him something funny had happened to me and I needed to know if anything similar was happening to other people who'd smoked it. All he wanted to know was if I had any of the stash left. 'Yeah,' I said, 'I only did half a joint.' 'Good,' he said, 'I can't talk right now. Bring the rest of it down and I'll buy it back.' He sounded real eager to get his hands on the stuff and I got suspicious. 'But what about what happened to me?' I asked. He said in that real arrogant tone of voice he's got, 'Hey, it's unfortunate you can't handle it: life's a bitch. Bring it back and I'll refund your money. That stuff's not for amateurs, anyway.' That remark pissed me off and I said, 'Nah, thanks anyway but I'll work it out for myself. Never mind.' Then you know what? He suddenly gets desperate. 'No, listen, bring it back right away and I'll give you double your money.' Now I'm real curious. 'Double my money?' I said. 'What's going on?' 'I can't talk now,' he says. 'Get down here right away and we can talk.'

"Can you imagine? That bastard's gonna buy the stuff back at twice the price."

"Sounds fishy to me," I said.

Hobart opened the bag of Blue Lotus and held it under the light. I leaned over and sniffed. I half expected it to be pungently sweet, as if it were treated with some form of narcotic. But it smelled oddly dry and fungal, not like pot at all, although it closely resembled the kind of blue herb grown on the Kona coast of Hawaii. The buds were full and tightly packed and they glistened with powdery blue resin.

"Did you actually get off on this stuff?" I asked.

"Christ," said Hobart, "I got blown away with one toke. But next thing I know, I'm stuck in a time warp." He sealed the baggie and stuffed it in his pocket. "I got to go now," he said.

"Mind if I come along?"

Hobart thought it over. "Well," he said, "just keep your two cents out of the business part of the trip."

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll keep my mouth shut just like a good young moron."

Needham lived in a duplex just off Fifth Avenue. He owned a rag business on Seventh Avenue, a house on Long Island, a glossy black Harley softail, and an assortment of bronze Buddhas smuggled out of Laos and Cambodia. Especially impressive was a seven-foot Buddha that stood facing the front door to his apartment. At least that's what Hobart tells me, because, as things turned out, I never got to see his place.

The cab took twenty minutes to get us downtown. The doorman buzzed Needham's place and said, "A Mr. Hobart Swann to see you, sir. He's with a friend."

"Hobart Swann, eh," a tinny, rather frantic voice came back. "He has no friends. Tell him to go away."

"Wait a minute!" Hobart shouted, getting all steamed. "You just told me on the phone you wanted me to come down. Right away, you said. I just spent \$8.50 on a cab . . ."

"I know what you want from me," the voice shot back, "and you'll never get it! No one will! Go away!"

"Listen, you sonofabitch. I don't want anything from you: you want something from me! Are you out of your mind?"

"Go away! Leave me alone!"

And the intercom clicked off.

"Sorry, sir," said the doorman, "you'll have to leave."

"What! I came all the way down from 125th Street and I'm not going to leave until I see that asshole. He's the one with the emergency, he's the one who had to see me right away."

"Perhaps he changed his mind, sir," said the doorman.

"Changed his mind! I've got better things to do than to be running all over the city while he changes his mind. Get him back on the intercom!"

"I'm sorry, sir," the doorman said. "Mr. Needham was quite explicit in his instructions."

"C'mon, Hobart," I said, "I'll kick in for the cab. And we can take a subway back uptown."

"Subway!" Hobart shouted, and stormed out of the building. "You take a subway! I'm not taking any goddamn subway. That lousy sonofabitch is trying to make a fool out of me."

By the time I caught up with him, Hobart was already standing on Fifth Avenue with his finger in the air.

"Sounds to me like Needham's been smoking too much of that Blue Lotus," I said.

"Suck a bunch of blowjobs," was all Hobart snarled in response.



Jeremiah said Annie Crystal was a perfect example.

"She's been here before, split, and now she's back again," he said. "You think she'll split again? I do. And why? Because she's only good at running away from things. She's never learned the special skills involved in running toward something."

Father Terry, Harry Hull, and several Club Q counsellors at least listened with open minds. They, better than anybody, knew the deficiencies of their program.

"We do our best to integrate the children into safe environments," said Father Terry. "75% of the runaways who come here end up back home and in school. That's a good track record, Mr. Jaffee."

"And I'd bet you that the same 75% regretted ever having left home and were just scared shitless by the time they came here. They're the easy ones to care for: a bus ticket, some pocket money for the trip home, and some kind words of encouragement are all it takes. I'm not here to discuss those kids. I'm talking about that 25% that have no regrets at all about living lives you and I might find repulsive. I think I can help some of them."

"What do you propose?"

"I'd like to lead them on an adventure. I'd like to get them far away from here and teach them to help youngsters with very severe disabling conditions to make new lives for themselves. In the process they will be educated and supervised but in the context of becoming successful at their jobs, and becoming role models for these other kids in a very special way."

"And where would you take them?" Father Terry asked.

"The Cuahla School upstate," said Jeremiah. "The school's director has turned what was once a holding tank and mini-institution into a true halfway house for kids with some of the most unique and severe genetic abnormalities. Those kids need help from their fellow human beings. They need people to go out with them to work and to work side by side with them and to live with them and be their role models and companions. Most of all, Father, they need to be needed. They need that sort of caring and indulgence that rarely comes from a professional for whom they become a line graph on a behavior chart or a case file that gradually thickens until someday it's passed on to somebody else. The kids here at Club Q on the other hand, need to feel important to someone special. Annie's real special to her pimp and he makes her feel it in a very real and intimate way. She'll never feel that back at her home or with the social service bureaucrats you pass these kids on to. Sure, the staff here are caring and spiritually committed to their work. But they're here and Annie and the kids like her need to be somewhere else. Picking them up off the gutter, wiping the tears from their eyes and packing them off to a social service system that means well but is fucked up, you should pardon the expression, won't do the trick for Annie. That's why she'll run away again, and be needed by a pimp again, and hang with him until it becomes unbearable and then she'll be back here again for a nap and a cookie until the wanderlust strikes again. It's a no-win cycle for her and the rest of that hardcore 25% because you offer them Sugarcandy Mountain when what they need is to be kept busy and feel important, that they make a difference in somebody's life in a very real way. And, yes, they need to see that other people have problems that are even greater than their own."

Harry had been having it out with Father Terry along these very same lines. They were arguing when I first approached them to arrange this meeting about Harry's feeling that the workers weren't doing enough to change the kids' lives over the long haul. And Father Terry as

vigorously insisted that beating up pimps was doing too damn much. Harry was at a disadvantage. By insisting that there was too much prayer and not enough practical results, he opened himself to Father Terry's request that he suggest a solution. Harry Hull had no solutions, and part of why he beat up that pimp was precisely because he was pissed at himself that he had no solutions.

Now Jeremiah had quite possibly set them on the road toward a solution.

"You've made a very interesting proposal, Mr. Jaffee," said Father Terry. "I'd like to explore it. Would the director have any objections if I and some of my staff visited the school and discussed your idea more fully?"

Jeremiah was beaming. "Hell no, Father," he said. "That's the purpose of my visit. I certainly don't have all the answers to these kids' problems, nor do I fully comprehend all the ramifications of my own ideas. I need you to see the school and correct my myopia when it comes to social planning. I need you to wake me up from my pipe dreams, if pipe dreams they are. I'll surrender gracefully.

"But if I'm on the right track, then your kids will benefit as much as the Cuahla School kids. If that could happen, then it's necessary to give it a shot."

"I'll call the director and make the arrangements," said Father Terry. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other business to attend to."

Everybody left the conference room and Harry Hull followed Jeremiah out to the street. I had a feeling they were going to hit it off.

"Aren't you the guy from uptown who's running for President?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, that's me."

"You know, I like the way you think. Kids like Annie and the other repeaters need something more substantial to hang on to than a moral transfiguration. I hope you and Father Terry will take your ideas somewhere. One thing bothers me, though."

"And that is?"

"This Presidential campaign of yours. Most people think it's a joke you're pulling, or some kind of nutty publicity stunt. I hope you're not trying to suck Father Terry and Club Q into some ego trip that you're on. If that were the case --"

Harry looked away from Jeremiah with a sweep of his eyes that seemed to encompass the whole city.

"Yes?" Jeremiah said, wanting him to make his point.

"You'd be a worse whore than any of those women lined up across the street."

Jeremiah smiled, looking Harry straight in the eye.

"You want to know what's behind my Presidential campaign?" he said. "I personally don't give a flying fuck if I ever hold public office. In fact, I sort of dread the prospect. But by arbitrarily taking this plunge into the political system, I'm able to jerk myself on a daily basis out of my own emotional lethargy and wake up to the fresh and exciting ideas that would, if they're ever realized, make the world somewhat better to live in. Everybody should have a windmill *du jour* to tilt at, and running for President is mine. At least for now. I'm hoping the events of my immediate future will wean me off that sort of crutch. By avocation I'm a puppeteer, and I suppose that means I have an affinity for creating my own realities. If the only reality my campaign creates is that Club Q and the Cuahla School start working together successfully, I'd be as happy as a pig in shit."

Harry seemed to study Jeremiah's face as if he were going to model it in clay.

"I believe you," he finally said. "But more than that, I know Father Terry can sniff out a con at one hundred paces. So yes, I'm going to let myself get excited about your idea. Only I'll still be keeping an eye on you."

"Ah," Jeremiah said smiling broadly and clapping his arm over Harry's shoulder, giving it a brief squeeze, "you idealists!"

Rodney Jackson had ringworm. Jean Luc picked through the black fuzz on his head, sifting out curls that fell from his scalp in small round patches.

"You been taking your pills?" Jean Luc asked.

"Yeah, I been taking my pills," Rodney answered.

He was sensitive about his ringworms. He didn't like anybody picking through his hair or asking if he had taken his pills. He didn't like having worms living in his skin, especially little worms he couldn't see and pull out himself. The more people fussed about his worms, the more he was reminded that they were there, no matter how hard he tried to forget.

Rodney was five years old and round as a little black buddha that had crawled down off a shrine. I could see he was getting more and more pissed at Jean Luc, but Jean Luc was determined to do his job. Rodney tried to squirm off his lap and started whining.

"No," said Jean Luc, "when I'm all done checking you out, you can go and play. Just be patient. I'm almost through."

"You been taking *your* pills, Jean Luc?" Rodney shot back at him, tears starting to gather in his eyes. *Now he's going to do it*, I thought to myself, *now he's going to get nasty*.

"I don't take no pills," said Jean Luc. "What foolishness are you talking?"

"Your conehead pills," Rodney said, trying to force a mocking smile past the tears. "'Cause your cone's getting pointier and if you don't take your conehead pills it'll get so pointy your . . . your brains'll pop out!"

Jean Luc stalled like he'd been slapped in the face. That's when Rodney almost made it off his lap, but Jean Luc grabbed the boy under his armpits and set him back.

"Never mind about my head," Jean Luc said. Rodney began blubbing, the tears drifting like slow pearls down his fat black cheeks. "Just be glad they got pills for your problem."

Jean Luc finished checking the boy out and let him go. He lumbered like a little hippo let out of a shipping crate into the day room next door with the other kids. Rodney's mother was an activist. She was largely responsible for setting the day care program up in the Project. Unfortunately, being an activist, she rarely spent time with her son.

"I like the way you handled that kid," said Jeremiah. "Your hands are gentle, your eyes are sharp, and your heart's big."

Jean Luc sort of smiled but didn't know what to say to that compliment.

"I hear you're making plans to join some colony out in Arizona," said Jeremiah. "I'd like to talk you out of that, if I can. I need your help."

The room next door was filled with black kids tumbling all over each other, laughing, playing, settling beefs, doing things with their hands. The room was nothing more than a crummy storeroom made of concrete blocks, but the walls were now covered with splashes of watercolor and fingerpaint which the kids used to signify that it was now their territory. The noise and the colors were a happy contrast, I thought, to the dark hallways and filthy courtyards leading to the place. Outside was a world of grown-ups, a world littered with crack bags, condoms and needles, a world of sewer smells. Inside, the kids made a different world without ever knowing how or why. Rodney was already enthroned on a beanbag chair, bossing his smaller friends around, shouting for food.

"You may have heard that I'm running for President," said Jeremiah. "Most people think it's a big joke but that's not important. What's important is that I'm trying to do something that'll make a difference in the lives of a lot of people. And I need your help."

Jean Luc cringed as if being asked for help twice made his ugliness ache.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

"I need a Press Secretary," Jeremiah said. "I can't do all the media work alone and I can't be in a thousand places at once. With you on my team, then I'll only need to be in 500 places at once; you'll take half."

Jean Luc actually stared at Jeremiah right in the eyes. His lower lip dropped in amazement.

"I understand how tough it's going to be for you to say yes, Jean Luc. You're going to be in front of lots of people all the time, you'll have to speak up for yourself and for me and field all sorts of questions, and you'll have to deal with a lot of people with hidden agendas and hostile attitudes. Probably the toughest part is going to be learning to wait and keep your spirits up while the rest of the world learns to take you seriously, learns to listen to what you have to say and watch the good things you'll be doing, rather than just taking you for some kind of freak."

Jean Luc took a deep breath.

"Yeah, I said the word," Jeremiah concluded. "You'll probably hear it a lot at first, if you join my team. So what? I'm confident you can do what needs to be done. I'll be right there with you to help you out when you need it. But I guarantee you that won't be too often."

Jeremiah stood up to go.

"I know you've got work to do," he said, "so I'm going to let you get back to it. Think over what I've asked you, and please understand that I'm 100% serious. Take care now."

They shook hands and Jean Luc never said a word. As we left the building, Jeremiah took a gris-gris bag Cassie made for him out of his pocket. He reached up and stuck it up in the corner of the doorsill with a large tack.



"Maybe it'll last there all of ten minutes," I said.

"That's all it needs, my young friend," said Jeremiah, "that's all it needs."

§

There are so many out there who are young and hungry and haven't had their day in the sun. Then, when guys like Farber and me fold up through sickness or despair, there's a momentary vacuum left behind and maybe two or four of them clutch and grab to fill it. Suddenly we're gone from the scene and there's not even a trail of bubbles left to mark the way we'd come.

Old lady Puccili was shipped out the other day. Rumor has it that she died with a thermometer still up her ass that the nurses forgot to take out several days before. Doesn't it figure? What we need are regular and frequent asshole checks in this joint.

Surgical sponges, fart bags, colostomy plugs, thermometers: the crap we're forced to carry with us into the world beyond. And what's not up our butts gets tossed into the box. Even though Johnny Gee had a closed coffin because of the mess he was, that didn't stop mourners from lifting the lid and dropping in notes, photos, lucky charms and assorted crapola that Johnny wouldn't have dignified with a place in his Caddie's ashtray. I know they meant well, as if their little mementos would somehow ease his passage through Hell, but Christ, when it's my time, spare me the window-dressing: take out any parts still of use to anybody (of which, I'm sure, there won't be many), burn the rest and grind the ash and bones into potting soil so at least some old lady's window box will benefit from my passage through this world. I won't rest easy knowing that my shell of flesh is still knocking around down below, taking up space.

It hurts more today and I suppose that's why my thoughts are dark and dismal. I think another stone's dropping out of my kidney, which means about three days of sheer hilarity are on their way. "Montaigne suffered from kidney stones all his life," Jeremiah told me once, long ago. "That's what turned him into a philosopher." Montaigne must have been lucky. Stones turn me into a sonofabitch.

That's why I said to Jeremiah that Gabriel didn't do us any favor by awakening the dead to new life. We had climbed up the church tower and were within arm's reach of the bronze statue which seemed ready to summon all of Manhattan to the Judgment Day. Jeremiah needed these oddball perspectives in order to clear his head and freshen his thought processes. He was not basically a political animal, yet the game he had started was taking off on its own momentum and I sensed he was a good deal uneasy.

"What I need to do," he said, "is carve an angel Gabriel puppet. Then, amidst candlelight and incense, he could summon the dead to life."

"And who would you have him call up?" I asked.

"Shit, that's a tough one. There are so many." He crossed his arms behind his neck and stared out past Gabriel at the bright star emerging from twilight. "I'd like to hear from Plato's own lips if he and Alcibiades were lovers, and I'd like Aristotle to tell me if the notorious Phyllis actually bridled him and rode on his back through the courtyard of Phillip's Macedonian palace, I would ask Dante how he managed to appear in his nephew's dream and reveal the hiding place of the last ten cantos, and I'd ask William Blake if he were disappointed that the heavenly Jerusalem was duller than the Jerusalem he penned. I'd want James Joyce to recite his epic of the sea."

Even in deep summer the temperature drops quickly that high up. As more stars brightened, I felt the short hairs on my arms and neck stiffen with the chill. My thoughts rode on Jeremiah's voice like a witch on a broomstick, however, and though I didn't understand where he was taking me, I couldn't move from the gargoyle on which I perched.

"And, of course, I'd summon Yehoshua, the Rabbi, known to history as Jesus, and ask him what he really said and did when he preached healing and brotherhood to the stiffnecked

Jews. And maybe then I'd call up all the tyrants and despots that ever lived and ask each one in turn if his moment in the sun were worth all the misery and bloodshed and endless retribution."

He stopped talking awhile and the spell was broken.

"Jeremiah," I said, "I'm cold as a witch's tit. I'm going down."

"Yes, you're right," he said. "It is cold up here."

We shimmied down the carvings and into the bell tower.

"That could be one hell of a puppet," Jeremiah said.

The kid picked the wrong bike. He was bent over with the top third of his ass-crack showing, lighting the firecracker under the rear tire of Jeremiah's motorcycle. And there we were, sitting on the stoop, watching him.

"What the fuck . . .?" said Jeremiah.

He walked over to the kid and clapped his hand on his neck. "Ack!" the kid actually said, just like he was a cartoon. "I didn't know it was yours! Honest!"

"Obviously," said Jeremiah. "Now we get to the ethical question: does it make any difference whether it's my bike or not for you to know not to light a firecracker under the rear tire? That's the real problem."

"C'mon, man, lemme go! I didn't mean nothin' . . ."

"Well now, that's my point. See, I'm running for the Presidency of the United States and the choices I make will ultimately be scrutinized by world leaders, philosophers, economists and the general public. Journalists of all political stripes will be just waiting for an opportunity to make me an object of scorn and derision. So the choice I make in regard to what I do with you becomes one of major importance."

"What?"

"Now, of course I could just let you go with a smile and a pat on the back saying, 'Well, just make sure you don't do it again, kid.' Or I could hold you for the cops."

"Aw, c'mon man . . ."

"Or . . ."

Jeremiah stroked his beard with his free hand.

"... I could take that firecracker and stick it up your ass."

The kid's eyes widened and he started hopping around, trying to break out of the hold. Even though he had five inches and 50 lbs. on Jeremiah, he couldn't.

"C'mon, man," he whined. "I'm sorry. Lemme go."

"No," Jeremiah said, "I think not. I think I'm going to stick the firecracker up your ass."

And by God he whipped the kid into this half-Nelson and started pulling off his pants. Jeremiah's hands can move fast when he wants them to, and I could barely make out how he got the belt undone and the firecracker brought around to the rear. The kid was screaming and hollering by then and, wouldn't you know it, he started to cry!

"Did I make my point, asshole?" Jeremiah finally said.

"Yeah, yeah, lemme go! Please!"

Jeremiah didn't budge. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Sixteen."

"A rather large moron for sixteen, I'd say. Are you politically active?"

"Huh?"

"Do you care about where this planet's rolling, son? Do you read the papers or listen to the news on TV? Do you pick sides in election campaigns and cheer on your candidate's slanders and calumnies while denouncing those of his opponent?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, man, just lemme go!"

"Hmm. I can see you're a master at sidestepping the truth in favor of spewing out statements of convenience. You'll go far, son. I'll tell you what. How'd you like to stop wasting time with firecrackers and start doing something productive with your life?"

"Like what?"

"Like work for me. Join my campaign."

The kid tried to twist his neck around to look Jeremiah in the eye and see if he were really on the level.

"What do I gotta do?"

"O the usual campaign legwork. Put up campaign flyers, run errands, get signatures on petitions. I'll even let you be my bodyguard."

Now that caught the kid's interest. Bodyguards, soldiers of fortune and space commanders carry about equal weight in the minds of adolescent males.

"Me? You want me to be your bodyguard?"

"Hard to fathom, isn't it? First, you can start out by guarding my bike while you give it a washing. My friend and I are going back up to the roof for a strategy conference. When you're finished, you can join us. Deal?"

"Yeah, ok. It's a deal."

Jeremiah let the kid up and backed off. First thing, the kid fixed his pants. He made no move to run.

"Where's the soap?" he asked.

"Look, son," said Jeremiah, "be resourceful. Now remember, I want that bike to shine."

"Say," the kid said, "how much to I get paid for working for you and being your bodyguard and all that?"

"Don't be so mercenary," Jeremiah said. "I'm not getting paid for running this whole show. When I get paid, you get paid."

That seemed fair enough to the kid, so he ran off to get a bucket and some auto polish.

Up on the roof I said to Jeremiah, "I really thought you were going to do it."

"What?"

"Put the firecracker up his ass."

"Listen," he said, "if I come out later and find my tires slashed, I'll know I should have..."



Ah, the inconstancy of it all. Time takes its turns, lifting one guy up and laying another flat, restoring words to the dumb and cutting the heart out of the well-intentioned.

Father Terry tried to tell me differently, that there's a point where time ends and all changes stop, and that's the realm of the soul after death. He and Jeremiah never saw eye-to-eye about that. Naturally, Jeremiah preferred to think that everything kept on going. He liked adventures and challenges and couldn't seem to rest content with things as they were, if they kept on that way for any length of time.

"That defines the spiritual problem of our epoch," Father Terry once told him. "Restlessness, impatience, a search for answers to fabricated questions, a need for people to see themselves on center stage rather than to look toward the center and accept the light of God's truth."

Take Farber for example. Yesterday he grunted to hold his own spoon. That's a big step for him. Now I can imagine him dying and being taken by angels to a window with many choices beyond it, lives to be lived, adventures to be undertaken, challenges to be conquered. He'd look through the window, moan, clutch his chest and drop dead all over again. The poor bastard's just not up for it. For him Father Terry's afterlife of clouds and harps would be ideal.

Jeremiah's different. No robes and haloes for him. I'm sure he wouldn't mind hanging out for awhile, but, as soon as the terrain got familiar, he'd be looking for the edge of the kingdom, looking for what's next door, what's left to be seen.

He'd be very disruptive to the serenity of the place.

People have a tendency, I've learned, to think God is no smarter than they are, and certainly no more compassionate or creative. As if God couldn't give Farber what he needs, and Jeremiah what he needs and me what I need and Father Terry what he needs, all in the same universe. Personally, I think that's the only way a self-respecting Supreme Deity would operate. I wouldn't pretend to know how He does it or why, because, like Job, I could never invent a hippopotamus, either.

That's why even after they started working together on the Cuahla School project Father Terry didn't talk much to Jeremiah. Harry Hull kept the lines of communication open between them, and I figure that was just as well.

And that's why Father Terry refused to attend Jeremiah's first press conference announcing his candidacy for the Presidency. It was held, at Jan Wit's request, in the Blue Eye. As much as Father Terry wanted to love sinners, he couldn't. He refused to set foot in the Blue Eye, he refused contributions Jan tried to make to Club Q, and he refused to see the kind of work that was really being done by Cassandra Sharpe in the development of her routines.

Harry said to Jeremiah, "I told Father Terry that Cassie was doing more to clean up the Strip than a brigade of priests. He didn't like hearing that, not one bit. I said she could work a special magic of her own, that she could take sluts and whores from the other joints and, by the time they finished a week of shows with her, they're transformed into dancers. Women who let strangers lick and poke them for a buck become almost virginal. They never go back to the other joints after working the Blue Eye, they never go back to their pimps and their drugs . . . none of that's good enough for them after a week with Cassie. They get straight jobs and take formal dance classes, they leave town and start experimental movement troupes of their own: it's

phenomenal what Cassandra does to their self-esteem. She's like a High Priestess, I told him, and she turns them into her acolytes, priestesses in their own right.

"Needless to say, that sort of talk pissed him off. But what the hell. Sometimes even a priest has to grow up and face the facts."

"He's going to kick you out of Club Q," Jeremiah warned.

"Listen," said Harry, "when it's time for me to leave that place, the parting will be amicable. We know each other's heart. I only want to learn from Cassie something that will help me do the same as she does, but with the kids, the runaways. Right now all we're doing for them is buying a little time. We're changing their survival tactics without removing them emotionally or spiritually from the theater of war. It's much more emotionally satisfying for those kids to be resting in the warm arms of a lonely trick who they know right off the bat is as much a sorry case as they are, than to be kneeling at prayer in the chapel or being fed into a human service bureaucracy which is, at best, a farce. And when the kids reach that magic age, 21, that's it, we don't want to know about them, their salvation is left completely in the ectoplasmic hands of supernatural forces.

"That's why I like your Cuahla School project. And that's why I want to learn as much as I can from Cassie, because hidden somewhere in her methods is the key to turning human degeneracy inside-out. As I see it, much to the good Father's chagrin, there's something miraculous happening right across the street from Club Q. It's unique, it's spontaneous, and there seems to be no hidden agenda behind it, and that's what I find fascinating. That's why I intend to make the most of its coincidental presence right across the street, and learn everything I can."

"Lesson #1, then:" said Jeremiah. "There's no such thing as a coincidence."



§

Mostly reporters from Manhattan's fringe weeklies showed up. They were young, full of themselves, and happy to kill a Friday afternoon with something amusing. They crowded into the combat zone, which is where--before Jan took over the place--the strippers used to torture the customers who thought they'd get the closest look at their pussies. Usually the combat zone was filled with clutches of Japanese. The strippers would hurl themselves into their laps, pull off their glasses and rub them between their legs for good luck, pluck out their ties, put one foot on each of the armrests and pull their heads right into the notch between their thighs . . . Christ, anybody who thinks that the Japanese have some sort of cultural superiority in regard to keeping their cool towards things of the flesh should see them in a strip-joint. Or, for that matter, take a good look at the Indians (Asian, that is) who run the rest of the peep shows and smut shops on the Strip.

There's nothing more democratizing among males than an ambience of sexual slime. I found that out soon enough.

One older guy sat in the back row. He had a notebook and pen resting in his lap. It was hard to make out his features in the dim light beyond the stage but his eye-pouches and fleshy cheeks seemed to have been chiselled by a thousand years of vigorous thrusting into other people's business.

Jan, himself, worked the sound machine from backstage. The drumming at first was inaudible, set on some frequency that Jan labelled "subliminal" with white tape. I handled the lights. Jeremiah wanted a little drama, so when Jean Luc came out, he was backlit by a halo of purple, followed by underlighting of blue. He wore a dashiki and a cloak.

Naturally, Jean Luc was scared shitless. "You're going to do fine," Jeremiah said. "Tell them whatever you feel you need to, and then back off. You have a good heart, Jean Luc. I've told you that before. A man with a good heart always looks good in public, no matter if he's nervous or inexperienced. They're going to love you."

When Jean Luc walked onto the stage with the backlighting and his odd way of dressing, the reporters were startled. Jean Luc seemed to have just climbed down off a flying saucer. Nobody moved, nobody coughed, nobody said a word.

"My name is Jean Luc Geissel," he said. "I am Mr. Jaffee's press secretary. I don't know why he wanted it that way, but here I am. I told him I'll do my best, and I'm telling that to all of you, too. If I don't understand a question or if I don't give you an answer that's complete and clear, catch me up on it. Mr. Jaffee wants me to help you all I can. If I'm confused about an answer, it's because the truth is still in bits and pieces and I don't know the full story, myself. What I don't know, I'll tell you I don't know."

I don't know if it was the barely audible drums or just the walk onstage that broke the ice, but Jean Luc was carrying himself like a pro. His body language seemed to say, "If you don't like my face, go fuck yourself: I've got more important things to worry about, weightier goals to accomplish."

"On the other hand," Jean Luc said, "I hope you'll be straight with us in return. If you want to get tricky and make a name for yourself with bogus headlines, lies and distortions in order to make Mr. Jaffee and the rest of his supporters look foolish, I'm not going to be able to stop you. But what will you have accomplished? A new voice coming right from the streets and from the hearts of the people will be shut up. That would be stupid, it seems to me. There are other voices on the street and other hearts, and they speak the language of guns and blood. There

are many of those voices and they speak more loudly each day. Jeremiah Jaffee wants to change those voices so they speak forthright talk like honest men. I hope you will listen to him closely, as I have done since he asked me to help him, and I am sure you will hear in his words the genuine bigness of his heart.

"Anyway, here he is, Mr. Jeremiah Jaffee."

Well, you should have heard the cheering that swelled up from Cassie and the strippers backstage. "Terrific, Jean Luc!" they shouted, "Good work! Way to go!" etc., etc. A lifetime of defeat, self-loathing and fear seemed to have cracked off Jean Luc's body like an eggshell, and I saw in Jeremiah's eyes that watery, happy look of his which told me that if this crazy campaign of his went no further, he'd be satisfied. Jean Luc had outgrown his deformity right before our eyes and the young man was ready to confront head-on all the new challenges life had in store for him.

The reporters picked up on this, too, as if by mental telepathy. As they cheered and signed thumbs up to Jean Luc who made his way, beaming, off stage, the drums throbbed louder and louder. Even the old guy in the back put down his pen and pad and started clapping.

Jeremiah did little more than introduce himself to the reporters and hand out position papers he had written on every major issue. The drums throbbed even louder and everyone in the room seemed to enter into a spiritual union that's impossible to define in words. Jean Luc's struggle to succeed had carried all of us to a new high ground from which we were better prepared to toss down ropes to our fellow seekers-after-light.

Then the Slovaki bothers appeared onstage in costume to perform Jeremiah's infamous puppet sketch, "Ben Franklin Joins the Hellfire Club", which had the reporters in stitches.

Jeremiah didn't tell Jean Luc that his father and grandfather would be backstage. Jean Luc froze in his tracks. His father walked over to him slowly, as if taking a good look at his son for the first time.

"Jean Luc," he said, holding out his arms, "my son, I am so very proud of you."

They embraced and the grandfather joined them and by God there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

As the reporters filed out, shaking Jeremiah's hand and wishing him the best of luck, it was the old guy who stared longest into Jeremiah's eyes. As he walked out, he was the only one to look up and notice the gris-gris bag pinned to the sill of the door.



Annie Crystal arrived at the Cuahla School with Harry Hull on the night of the full moon pearl.

She was frightened of the students living there, which is understandable. Of course they were people with feelings and needs like the rest of us, and she wanted so much to love them and care for them and give to each of them the touches and hugs and soft words she had wanted for herself but had never gotten. It hurt her that she was frightened of them.

But who could blame her. Our visits to Lake Zoar were getting more frequent, as if Jeremiah needed the hills and the broad skylscapes by the lake and the crisp stars at night to keep him going. So I was getting used to the people there and had started to become attached to a few of them. They were so strange, though. They were so oblivious to the social cues normal people take for granted. Some of them would shit in their pants without thinking twice about it. Others would shit in their pants to make a point or teach someone a lesson. Lou Scarpeta walked right up to her with his hand out to shake hers and started talking to his hand when she backed off, startled. Carlton Walker sniffed her chair each time she stood up. Celeste wouldn't look her in the eye but inched her way right to her side, walking on the balls of her feet, and said, "Ti-ti-ti. . ." into her ear.

I thought Annie was going to cry.

Then she met Danny Long.

Danny had just arrived at the school. He was over thirty years old and had just been found by a newsboy locked in the basement of his mother's house. It turns out she had locked him away when he was a little boy, and fed him dog food and table scraps all these years. He had gotten the middle finger of his left hand stuck in a bottle when he was real little, and it

stretched out as he grew up until the finger hung by a slender thread of flesh about four inches past his other fingers. The bottle had hung on that finger over thirty years.

Danny could speak and understand what was spoken to him. He didn't speak often, though. Most of the time if you tried to talk to him, he would just look away. He didn't seem frightened at all by the strangeness of the world into which he'd been thrown, which surprised me. In fact, he showed no emotion at all, not fear or anger or even curiosity.

He could even read a little.

It was the night of the full moon pearl. I sat with Harry, Annie and D-J by the campfire D-J made. By looking deeply into the fire I could make out colors I never thought were in fires, rich purples and a kind of red that seemed to float in nothingness near the tips of each flame and, on occasion, a lemon shimmy in the middle of the fire which D-J said to watch for, that it was the salamander in the flame and that it was good luck.

Harry said to Annie, "Well, what do you think of this place?"

Annie stared into the fire. "It's ok," she said.

D-J stared into the fire, too. "It's real different from the city," he said. "I think if I lived here all the time, I'd start to go crazy."

Annie didn't say anything. She watched a spark float off a flametip toward the overhanging maple leaves. It vanished before it reached the leaves.

"I like it up here," I said. "Bats fly around at sunset and early in the morning you can see clouds being born off the lake."

Annie looked up at me. "No kidding," I said, handing her another marshmallow for her stick. "I saw this mist like a column of steam rising off the lake and gathering into this little

cloud just about thirty feet above the water. I stood there staring at the cloud and watching it thicken ever so slowly. It was amazing. I never saw anything like it before."

"You've seen that tree and that stone, haven't you?" asked Harry.

"Yeah," I said. "That's pretty amazing, too. See," I said, turning to Annie, "this tree started growing from a seed that landed under the curve of a huge boulder. As it grew, it curved up and around the boulder, spreading its trunk partway to cover it, as if it was trying to keep it warm. It's at the top of the hill behind the school. If you'd like, tomorrow D-J and I can walk you up."

When Annie didn't say anything and kept looking into the fire, D-J looked at both Harry and me. Harry signed to him not to worry, that these things take time.

"Hey D-J," I said, "isn't there a legend around here about that tree and stone and some Indian warrior?"

"There are lots of legends about Lake Zoar," he said. "Indian spirits and ghosts and flying saucers. There used to be a man who walked all through the mountains in these parts dressed all in leather. They called him the Leatherman and they say he smelled so bad for never bathing that the townsfolk could smell him coming fifteen minutes off. People felt sorry for him, though. Some say he loved a woman back in France who dumped him. Others say he made her come to America with him and she died here of some frontier illness. In any case, the women of Tolbrook and McClellan Heights left pies and breads on their windowsills for him to take with him on his travels. He never spoke to anybody, not say thank you or good day or anything. Still, the women felt badly for him and he was able to keep walking and walking through the Berkshires for over twenty years."

Suddenly Danny Long stepped from behind the school into the glare of the fire. I almost shit my pants, that time.

D-J was startled too, but recovered quickly. "Hi, Danny," he said. "Would you like to join us?"

He motioned to a vacant stump.

Danny didn't say a word, didn't even seem surprised to see us. He turned and headed back for the shadows.

"Man," said D-J, "It's going to take a while for that poor guy to make out what's going on in the real world."

"How could his mother do that to him?" Annie suddenly asked.

"She was crazy, honey," said D-J. "When they found him, they found her, too, out of her mind, living all alone in that house. They took her away to a mental ward where she'll probably spend the rest of her life."

Annie was letting that sink in when I called out to both of them to see the moon. It had just risen over the trees behind the school and was bright enough to cast shadows. It was full and seemed to be set in the center of a sharp silver circle.

"The full moon pearl," said D-J. "That's what we call the moon with a halo. Sometimes a tiny wisp of cloud floats in front of it, and it looks like a pearl resting on a velvet cushion. It's a very magic moon, you know."

"What kind of magic?" asked Annie.

"The kind the Indians used to make," said D-J. "Not that evil black magic they make in big cities, but the white magic of the Earth and the Sky. The same kind of magic as the tree and the stone."

"And the Leatherman?"

"Yeah, the same kind that he had to be able to keep walking around and to be cared for by strangers. Give this place time and you'll find it's really a strange and wonderful part of the world."

Annie covered her face with her hands. Her shoulders shook, but she cried without making a sound.

Harry went over to her and touched her shoulder. "What's the matter, Annie?" he said.

"How could his mother do that to him, his damn, damn mother, God damn the bitch to Hell!"

Jeremiah brought me up to Dr. Dominic Mirandola's apartment on West End Avenue with close to a quarter ounce of Blue Lotus in his pocket.

"Jeremiah," said the doctor, "sometimes you amaze me with your discoveries." He looked the Blue Lotus over with a magnifying glass, the handle of which was ivory carved into girls with flowing gowns holding hands in a circle, twined all around with spring buds and grapevines. "I haven't seen this resin in over five years." He handed the bud back to Jeremiah. "Your hunch was right. It's not marijuana at all. Therefore, it's perfectly legal. Enjoy!"

"Cute, Dom," said Jeremiah. "Now what is it?"

Dr. Mirandola had quite a few run-ins with the law. He and Jeremiah met in the middle of one of them and Jeremiah had been instrumental in getting him out of the line of fire. Since then, they shared a weekly bottle of Medoc at Chloe's Cafe on 103rd Street.

"It's the latest generation of an experiment in biogenetics a colleague of mine and I began about 15 years ago. Have you tried it?"

"No, but I know someone who has, and it's not pretty."

"No, I don't suppose it would be. It was not designed for a casual romp in the stratosphere. And by now the mutations should produce effects which are quite remarkable."

"What was it designed for?"

"Well, now, that all depends . . ."

It seems that the good doctor had made a reputation for himself in the genetic labs of CCNY studying the molecular structure of thought. At least, that's how Jeremiah puts it. He simultaneously developed a computer simulation of thought-chemistry and a suspension of

colloids in a magnetic field which, when energized, exhibited the wave patterns of actual thought. *Big deal* I remember thinking at the time *I know lots of people who can think and they're still assholes* but I kept my mouth shut. He and his research team, however, never gave up the search for a living organic system that could, with a little bit of tinkering, serve as a medium for thought-propagation.

This meant, naturally, that a variety of herbal specimens passed through his labs monthly. Hence, his problems with the law. The good doctor, though not one to turn up his nose at a party, would never turn his research into a party. Just recalling those days brought a light to his eyes.

"Yes, I remember when it happened quite vividly," he said. "We had mingled the genetic material of a variety of maize and a bioluminescent fungus which we didn't know at the time had hallucinogenic properties."

"Quite the cocktail," said Jeremiah.

"I should say. It was a joke, really. They were the only viable specimens we had in the lab at the time. It was the only instance of serendipity I can remember in my whole career: it turned out to be the start of our most productive line of research."

"Then how did you lose touch with it?"

"Well, the shifting of public morality from the acceptance of such research to its interdiction had the general effect of kicking biogenetic research labs like mine out of the universities and into backrooms and basements, where it goes on, mind you, to this day." His tone of voice turned bitter. "As usual, the American public, through its elected representatives, threw the baby out with the bathwater."

"Make a note of that," Jeremiah said to me. I nodded.

"But not before we came up with what you've called--quite poetically, I might add--Blue Lotus."

Dr. Mirandola began to laugh. "One of our research associates, a Mr. Blumenfeld as I recall, recognizing the new plant's resemblance to marijuana, took a bud home and smoked it. Fifteen hours later we had him in a Sitz bath with electrodes on his temples and tape recorders catching his every word. It was a remarkable experience altogether."

"Well, don't leave me hanging," said Jeremiah. "What exactly happened?"

"I'll loan you the tapes and you can hear for yourself. Suffice it to say that this Blue Lotus of yours had the property back then of reducing the millihertz output of the brain's electrical signals by discrete quanta. It was as much the rhythm of this reduction as it was the reduction, itself, that was intriguing. Listen to the tapes. All I'll say for now is that the brain's affects of consciousness change drastically as the electrical discharge approaches zero.

"Yes, I'll warrant you those were a remarkable few days. I don't think Mr. Blumenfeld has yet recovered."

The doctor, though winked at Jeremiah. "I should think however, that a life spent with a smile on one's face and a vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem spread before one's eyes would be a fate devoutly to be wished.



Farber! Farber!

You bastard. Why do I waste my time telling you all the dark and dirty stories of my life? You, with your tubes up your nose, and your piss-bag, and your snoring, and your farts. What right has your decrepitude got to intrude upon my misery?

Ah, you bastard, I forgive you. In the course of my lifetime I've learned to make allowances. When the nurse rolls me over for a sponge bath and sticks her fingernail up my ass to make me jump, I forgive. When the blood gets drawn twice because the first sample is misplaced, I forgive. When the bedpan that's left by the open window to chill gets shoved under me, I forgive.

I forgive, I forgive, I forgive.

For you, Farber, I can make allowances.

One night I confessed to Farber that I had fallen in love with Twyla Cuahla. She was almost 30 years older than me, but that didn't matter. As our visits to Lake Zoar grew more frequent, a weekend here, a weekend there, I found myself watching her from a distance.

I overheard her talking to a state inspector from the department of mental retardation. "I've seen the other schools you license," she said. "The children are left to roll around on the floor and self-stimulate until a behavior erupts and then chaos reigns. 'Community awareness' means that the staff drives a van full of students into a mall parking lot and leaves them in the van while they go and shop. You spend days poring over data sheets and bloated files but not once have I seen you look into a student's eyes. Where's the bottom line if not there?"

Twyla knew what it meant to be a success in a cutthroat business. She could see right through the misbegotten bureaucrats and state periodically inflicted on her time, saw the lack of creativity in their eyes, the vacancy, the smoldering defensiveness. Every one of them was a personal failure, dependent upon treading water until they could collect a pension, fearful of both change and common sense. "You won't find that sort of horror in this school," she said. "I wasn't trained as you were to master the art of complacent non-commitment. I renounced my ability to hide behind ledgers and paper realities when I woke up strapped to a gurney in the state detox ward and had to look hard at what I was and what little there was left for me to become."

You had to admire her moxie, though dealing with low-level state assholes can't be shit to dealing with megabuck movie moguls and temperamental stars and their agents. She had a way of sizing them up with her eyes. If she looked them over and saw that they were willing to help her make better lives for her students, she could be sweet and generous in every word and gesture. If she looked them over and saw nothing there, she blew them off with a casual wave of her hand toward the files.

She dropped everything, too, to be with one of her kids in crisis. Once, when Carlton Walker put his head through the wall like a blunt black cannonball, Twyla was on her knees with D-J stroking his hair and wiping his tears and talking so warmly to him in soft whispers that even with all his anger and mental confusion, Carlton hugged her arm gently and calmed right down. "So much of my life has been spent coddling the egos of entertainers and producers," she told me once, "and coddling myself through a thick haze of drugs and alcohol, that I feel I owe something to people in real need. I had so much time for the bullshit back in the old days and it nearly killed me. I've grown up now, you see, and can't afford to waste my energy on anything less than the essential."

Her hair was going grey and she did nothing to touch it up. Her skin was pale and slackening a bit with age. She kept her figure like an aging dancer, her every movement taut with purpose and grace. And her eyes: a rich brown they were, like fertile, fragrant earth. I could come to her full of confusion about a client I was caring for in the city, or depressed over some of the madness Jeremiah was sucking me into, or just plain frightened that life's undertow was dragging me way out over my head and suddenly she'd turn those eyes toward mine and without saying a word share her inner strength with me as if through a transfusion of psychic energy.

Yes, I confessed to Farber how I wanted her to hold me and sleep with me and make me an intimate part of her life so her magic would always surround me.

And I found myself starting to cry, with Farber oblivious, hacking and gasping to bring up some phlegm, crying that it never came to pass, that love, crying that until the day she died I never could bring myself to tell her how I felt, crying that my greatest personal defeat was a lack of courage a long time ago when I could have shared my feelings and instead feared too much the gentle rejection in those brown eyes.

Farber, you bastard.

Abelard Geissel, Jean Luc's grandfather, sat in the easy-chair while Jeremiah talked to the man in the blue silk suit. He looked around the room at the candles and the puppets and the statuettes. The place smelled like the cool stone of the retaining wall across the alley mixed with burnt wax and incense. I could understand his nervousness being around Jeremiah because of his innate fear of all things voodoo. I felt it myself.

Ever since he met Cassandra, Jeremiah had gotten somewhat heavily into things voodoo.

There were the mini-rituals I noticed when he started work on a new puppet, a couple of whispered phrases before attempting a particularly difficult knife-stroke, a sudden fascination with the phases of the moon during the puppet's creation. Then the times at Lake Zoar and on the roof of Tity-who-can when he meditated, alone or with Cassie, and I'd swear I felt tremors of energy in the air around him.

Whatever was going on in his brain, it was making me nervous. Abelard, the old man, could feel it in the air because he grew up in New Orleans not far from the tomb of Marie Laveaux and could smell voodoo at a hundred paces.

The man in the blue silk suit said, "But if you want to get into politics this deep, you need the right management. It's a jungle out there, kid. And a science, too, which it's best not to forget."

"I appreciate your interest, Mr. Fogg, but the whole point of this campaign is to challenge the rules of the political game," said Jeremiah. "If somebody managed me properly, I'd win the election for all the wrong reasons."

Fogg tried to let that one sink in, an amazed look on his face.

"Look, kid," he said, "I like your style and I think you maybe got something with this 'spend nothing' campaign tactic. If you can pull that off, or even come close, the average voter's gonna know you're the guy who can balance the budget and get rid of the deficit. Me, I'll start believing in Santa Claus, but that's beside the point. You're also nutty enough with your puppets and oddball friends and that kind of crapola to attract attention. Even that meditation crap and the health food. I think it's good timing: the world may just be ready for that sort of leadership style. I dunno. But I'm willing to give it a try. With me managing your campaign, you'll take this country ward by ward, precinct by precinct. See, that's my strong suit: the little details. There's no room in my Brooklyn skull for the Broad Picture. I just take a campaign on its way step by step, handshake by handshake.

"I think we'd make a pretty good team."

The way Jeremiah looked the little guy over like he was some strange fruit just dropped out of a tree, I had to laugh.

"What's in it for you, Mr. Fogg?" Jeremiah asked.

"For me? Why, the usual, Mr. Jaffee. If you win, I'll be a prominent figure in national politics. Every other candidate for any office in the world will figure I'm a miracle-worker. My opinions will be quoted in newspapers and magazines with readerships that don't live in Brooklyn. Big league politicians'll pay me a fortune for my advice.

"That what I've always wanted. In my line of work, that's the pinnacle. And the tougher the challenge, the higher the pinnacle: get my meaning? Getting you elected is gonna be one hell of a challenge."

"That's all?"

"Mr. Jaffee, I got the campaign weasel in my blood. My grandfather worked for Tammany and my old man was a Roosevelt man to the day he died. Making strategies and getting out the vote was a passion for them. Call it a fascination with the mechanics of democracy, call it an obsession as overpowering as women or gambling, call it whatever you want: it's in my blood too, and working for you will give me the kind of challenge I need at this time in my life."

"You know there's nobody making any money off this campaign, don't you? No start-up finds, no fundraising. If, God willing, I should qualify for matching funds, I won't have any funds to match. I want to be sure you understand that fully."

"Please, Mr. Jaffee, if it were money I was after, I wouldn't be talking to you. I could make lots more at the track and it wouldn't be so time-consuming."

Jeremiah shook his head and laughed. "Mr. Fogg," he said, "I'm not sure why, but I like you. You remind me of a friend of my father's, a guy named Zowie. He started his career as an enforcer for the Brooklyn mob and ended up traveling around the country making a living as a racetrack tout. I met him when I was a kid, and he impressed me as a hell of a nice guy. Rumor had it that he had a dick that hung down to his knees and that what he enjoyed doing with it was sticking it up a woman's ass."

"Mr. Jaffee," said Fogg with a grin, his arms spread wide, "I accept the compliment in the spirit in which it was offered."

"Zowie had a dark side, Mr. Fogg," said Jeremiah. "He told me once that he had recurring nightmares in which he re-enacted the assassinations of his youth. Men would fall on their knees to him begging for their lives and crying for mercy. And each time Zowie had to kill them all over again, one bullet right in the skull, even though he had forgotten after all those

years whatever it was the guy had done to deserve it. After each dream he'd wake up in a cold sweat. He'd pour himself straight scotch and chugalug it, followed by a shot of water.

"Do you have any recurring nightmares, Mr. Fogg?"

"Mr. Jaffee, I've had my share of nightmares," Fogg said after a pause. "I don't let them get to me."

"I'll give you a call," said Jeremiah.

"Did you read those editorials?" Ward asked.

I bent his right leg at the knee and, with one long, steady motion, pressed the heel down toward the back of his thigh. Paralyzed muscles, unless they are frequently stretched, will shrink and lose all their tone. Then the body becomes all bent out of shape and, depending on the type of nerve damage, can suffer considerable pain.

"I don't read newspapers," I said.

"You better start. Your friend seems to have made quite a hit with them."

"Yeah, he put on quite a show."

"So I gather."

Eddie the monkey took the newspapers after Ward was through with them. He seemed inordinately attracted to the personal section. Maybe it was the pictures of the hearts and the pretty men and women in the adds for dating services. I don't know. But Eddie would turn sort of moony and sniff the columns and maybe once or twice lick the page.

Then he'd tear it up suddenly and go on to sports.

"The world is hungry for entertainment," said Ward. "And for solutions to their problems. When they find something that may be a solution that's also entertaining, they eat that up. God knows Jeremiah doesn't have to compete with philosophers and intellectuals to get where he's going."

I worked on Ward's lower legs. It's difficult to keep the muscle tissue evenly saturated with blood in the extremities in order to avoid cramping and paralytic gangrene.

"It's not just that," I said.



"What do you mean?"

"He's catching all the breaks. He has some secret schedule of operations in his head, and everything seems to work right on schedule."

"There's nothing wrong with being lucky."

"That's just it. It's more than luck. Jeremiah's never been a lucky person. He's almost forty and he's still knocking around doing a little this and that to pay the rent. Suddenly, he's . . . energized."

"That's not uncommon. Middle age may be bringing his goals into focus. He may not be unduly lucky but he is talented in a variety of ways. Focus those talents and remarkable things happen."

"Maybe."

I don't like to do less than 15 minutes of kneading on the lower extremities. Ward was quiet for most of that time. "What are you getting at?" he finally asked.

"Cassie, his girlfriend, gave me some herbs to burn not long ago. They were for good luck. I didn't ask for them, but she seemed to think I needed them and kind of urgently, too. So I burned them. They smelled ok, nothing special. Next thing I know, it's the next day. I had passed out. I had planned to take the train to midtown to work on this geriatric client of mine, an old lady who's a real lunatic, but that's another story.

"That was the night they had the electrical fire in the subway, remember? The best I can figure, I would've been caught right in the middle of it."

Ward couldn't say anything because I had his jaw resting in my palm while I massaged his neck muscles. When I finished, he said, "That's just a coincidence."

"That's not an answer," I said. "Besides, Jeremiah says there's no such thing as a coincidence. Hang around long enough with Cassie and I'll bet you'll think the same. She's definitely no ordinary woman."

"Are you implying she has magic powers?" Ward laughed.

"I don't believe in magic, only in facts. With her around facts start cropping up that . . . confuse me. I just don't know. I mean, I really like her and she's a terrific person, but I just don't know."

Ward let all that sink in while I rolled him over onto his back. Eddie suddenly climbed up my back and sat on my shoulders. He started picking through my hair.

"Eddie!" Ward said, "get off him!"

"Hey, it's ok," I said. "I like the chimp. Let him pick all he wants as long as he doesn't try to fuck my ear."

"You never can tell with Eddie," said Ward. "Off, Eddie!"

And the monkey leaped to the floor, grabbed the newspaper and settled back with a half-chewed banana.

"You know," said Ward, "if you think she's really got some influence over the things of this world, I'd like to meet her. Since my accident . . . well, I could use a fifteen minute lecture from someone who really believes that things aren't what they seem."

"I already talked to her about you."

"Really? What did she say?"

"She was sewing part of a costume together in Jeremiah's place at the time. She seemed to be waiting for my question, honest to God. She said not to worry, that when the time was right Jeremiah would come by with what you needed."

"And did she say what it was I needed?"

"She didn't say anything after that. I tried asking her, but she said both you and I would have to be patient."

"Patient, huh? Whatever could she mean by that? I couldn't possibly know anything about being patient."

"Don't start getting all worked up," I said.

"Ok, ok," he said. "It's just that these New Age shamans are so goddamn mysterious. If you can work miracles, then work 'em and shut up about it. Some of us have paid our dues being patient. If it's all just a line of Squishead malarkey, then spare us your fantasies."

"Hey, look what you're doing. I'm trying to loosen you up, and you're getting all pissed off and tight. Forget I said anything. You had a tough break and now you're paralyzed. Nobody owes you a miracle. I'm sorry I shot off my mouth. I guess I thought you could handle it."

"No, no, look, you're right. Forget what I said. I'd still like to meet her. Any friend of yours is a friend of mine."

"Just wait for Jeremiah to come by," I told him.

And I meant it.

Farber came to last night. He looked around in the half-light of the blue night bulb on the toilet side of the room and asked where the hell he was.

"Farber," I said, "it's 3AM. Lemme sleep."

I didn't realize what I was saying. He was waking me up from this Christ wonderful dream about Twyla Cuahla and it took time to sink in that he was actually alive and talking. I forced my eyes open.

"Who the fuck are you?" I heard him ask weakly. The tubes up his nose rattled a little when he talked.

"Farber, don't tell me you don't remember *me*, you're my roommate for the last 8 months: that really hurts."

He took a couple of slow breaths before he could talk again.

"What place is this?" he asked.

"It's kind of a nursing home for old derelicts like us, without any money."

"Derelicts," he said after breathing awhile. "Who's a derelict? I got money."

"Yeah? Don't tell the doctors. They'll start charging you."

"What's this shit up my nose?"

"Don't look now, but I think by tomorrow you'll notice they've stuck shit up your ass, too. You've been in pretty bad shape, as far as I could tell. You've been hanging on by a thread. The staff's been laying 4 to 1 odds that you won't make it past next week."

"Jesus Christ --!"

"Speaking of which, you're safe."

"What do you mean, 'safe'?"

"A priest came in last week and administered Extreme Unction. It's guaranteed now you're going straight to Heaven."

"Whaddya mean? I'm no Catholic!"

"I know. The priest came to the wrong room. But I wasn't going to tell him that he was supposed to be with McLeary down the hall. I figured, let him finish up first. Then, when he was all done with you and you were safely tucked into Heaven, I'd tell him."

Farber's face in the blue light had reminded me of Meyer's face in the blue light that seeped into his apartment. He lived in a dump upstairs from the Blue Eye Burlesk, right next to the winking blue neon sign. He tried to block the blue light with window-shades, sometimes, but his flat would still be streaked with vertical and horizontal bars of light from around the shades. Sometimes he felt the need to open the shades all the way and let all the neon glitz crowd out some of his loneliness.

That night I tried to set him up with Dionysia, he tried to keep his place as dark as possible.

"Why don't you turn on a light," I said, "for Chrissake?"

"I have enough light," he said.

Though he tried to scurry into the shadows, I could see briefly when he opened the door that he was trying to hide something. I turned on the light, myself.

Meyer had an ice pack pressed to the side of his face.

"Do you mind?" he said. "Turn off the fucking light."

I turned it off. "What happened?" I asked.

"I don't want to discuss it."

"Let me guess, then. Smitty the pimp, right? He was having one of his temper tantrums and you got in the way."

"Jan had him thrown out of the place, told him he never wanted him bothering his girls again. It seems he lost another whore to Cassandra's dance troupe. Those bouncers of Jan's tossed him across the sidewalk. Unfortunately, when he got to his feet, he was close enough to kick me in the head. Frankly, I didn't know what hit me. I vaguely remember Nick trying to get me unwedged from between the wheels of his souvlaki boat while Memnon chased Smitty down the street. The other bouncers crowded around to help me and that's all I remember until Jan was carrying me up the stairs. He's a nice guy, that Jan. He paid for his own doctor to come by and look me over."

I'll admit I was pissed. "That Smitty's a real cocksucker," I said.

"Yeah, he is that," Meyer agreed.

"I'd like to be around to see him get what's coming to him. I'd like that very much."

"Listen, it's over. Don't be getting yourself into trouble. Forget it. I don't want the knife you get in your back to be on my conscience."

I was glad when I first got there because I was bringing good news. Now, I was depressed as hell.

"Ok, ok," I said, "it's forgotten. No more said."

"Thank you."

"Anyway, I came to tell you that there's this woman I showed your poem to who really likes it. She said you were a wonderful poet."

"What?" he said. "You showed a woman my poem? And she liked it?"

"Loved it. And she wants to meet the poet. How about that?"

"What!" He jumped off the bed and started pacing around the room between the bars of light as if he were in a frame. "You've got no right to show my poem to anybody I don't know. You didn't even ask, didn't have the courtesy . . ."

Meyer was just nervous that a woman wanted to meet him.

"Wake up and smell the coffee, man," I said. "You've got an opportunity now to meet a terrific, good-looking chick and talk to her about your poetry. Don't blow it by getting pathological on me. You can meet her tomorrow if you want."

"How could I do something like that? I mean, there's no time to think about it, to get prepared . . ."

"Meyer, you're not cramming for an exam. All you do is meet her and maybe buy her a cup of coffee. And then you talk."

"Hah! Talk! Look at me!" He shifted the ice in the bag and replaced it on his face. "I'm in no condition to talk to a woman. What could we possibly have in common that we could talk about? No, it's absolutely out of the question."

"Meyer, what are you going to do? Jerk off in milk bottles all your life? Hide yourself from the world in this beat-up burrow like some hibernating animal? You're not in hibernation, man! You've got beautiful thoughts in your head and you're a nice guy. I'm not saying you need to marry this woman, Meyer. Just let her get to know you and you get to know her. It'll do you good."

"Isn't it obvious to you why I can't let her get to know me . . ."

"Cool out, man. She knows you're a dwarf. Big deal."

"She knows?" He stood there shocked, as if I had just slapped him.

"Of course. What kind of asshole do you think I am to let her find *that* out by surprise?"

"And she still wants to meet me?"

"Very much so."

All of a sudden his face didn't hurt so much. I could hear him pacing back and forth, apparently deep in thought.

"Tomorrow, eh?" he said with a bit of a smile in his tone.

"There you go, Meyer," I said. "That's the right attitude."

First things first, I thought to myself. There would be ample time to take care of Smitty.



A unique stuff, that Blue Lotus. At least, that's what I gathered when Jeremiah was explaining it to Hobart.

"Take steroids, for example," he said. "What's bad about them isn't that they make you strong and fast and enduring. Those are positive qualities. What's bad is that they also wreck your circulatory system and your liver, they shrink up your balls and they make you bleed through the rectum. And, they can make a guy grow tits. As much as I like to lift weights, those are enough reasons to keep me away from steroids. But suppose someone invented a steroid or some such chemical that caused all the good things to happen with no bad side effects. I know that's a big supposition, but just suppose it anyway.

"Wouldn't that be a major breakthrough in long-term human health? We'd be able to handle the contingencies of daily living more independently and with much greater self-confidence, if we could overcome some of our genetic limitations in terms of strength and endurance. We'd feel better about ourselves and would, therefore, resist more strongly the effects of stress on our lives.

"Now imagine the same sort of chemical agent being consciously designed as a psychopharmaceutical. Not something adulterated and synthesized out of lifeless chemicals, but something that sprung from the heart of the earth, itself, with some biotechnical encouragement from some rather creative scientific minds. That's what Blue Lotus was intended to be from the start. Dom Mirandola says that ones who expected to make use of Blue Lotus first were the researchers who designed it. That's how positive and excited they were about what they were getting into.

"That was 15 years ago. Since that time there have been major breakthroughs."

"Listen," said Hobart, "I don't care what you say, what happened to me was no fun."

"I know, I know. You didn't know what you were getting into. When LSD first soaked into Sandoz's skin, he thought he was going out of his mind. He survived, though, and went on to begin exploring a new pharmacological methodology of probing into, and possibly altering for the better, the nature of human thought.

"Well, that was then and this is now. From the way your friend Needham acted, I figure he caught on. Blue Lotus is by no means your everyday sort of mindfucker. It's not pot and it's not psilocibin and it's not a narcotic. Nobody knows what it is, only that it grows in the ground and can work strange miracles on your mind. If you let it, that is. That's the key."

"I think Needham just went crazy from that shit," said Hobart.

"Dom thinks differently, and he helped invent the stuff. No, Needham must have had some sort of experience that taught him to hang on to his stash. He probably doesn't have much of it. Maybe it got mixed up in someone's regular shipment by mistake, only a pound or so. Dom will know soon enough because Needham has the resources to search out some of Dom's colleagues to analyze the stuff for him. That's when Dom will hear about it, and he'll let me know."

"So what do I do in the meantime?"

"Hang on to it. Dom's running some tests on the sample I gave him. We may be on to something, here."

"O, we may?" said Hobart. "Indeed. Isn't that nice for world science. In the meantime, what am I supposed to smoke?"

"Now, now," said Jeremiah. "There's no sacrifice too great to make for the betterment of mankind. If you have to smoke something, do what Einstein did."

"What's that?"

"Smoke a pipe."

I sat on top of the stone under the spreading tree and watched the rising of the moon. It was approaching full and its glare washed the lesser stars right out of the sky. The day had been a scorcher and when I finished working with the students to Twyla's satisfaction, I took it upon myself to hike up the hills and spend the night where it would be cool and relatively free of bugs.

Annie took a special liking to Celeste. She walked her down to the Lake and taught her how to enjoy the water. If left to herself, Celeste would walk just to the edge of the water, walk back to her blanket on the beach, spin around, and walk back to the edge of the water. Over and over. By taking her by the hand, Annie showed her it was ok to go in the water and play. It was as if Annie saw in Celeste the beautiful girl she would have been if she hadn't been retarded, a real popular girl with the boys, and she could envision knowing her in other circumstances and really being good friends. She also had learned from D-J, in the broadest terms, of course, how she had been exploited by her caretakers in state facilities. Her heart went out to the girl and she wondered how her mother, Molly, who seemed so nice, could have left her in the hands of the state for so long.

If she ever had a daughter like Celeste, Annie said that she would never send her away.

"What would you do with her?" I asked.

"I'd take her on the road with me," she said. "I'd keep her with me all the time so I could watch out for her."

"I don't know if that's so smart. You've got a pretty rough time watching out for yourself."

"I watch out for myself better if I've got someone else to watch out for," she said.

*Good answer* I thought. I could picture the two of them hitching rides and sharing sodas and actually making a life for themselves on the road. Of course, if they really took off I'd be scared shitless that they'd both end of gang-banged and face-down in a river somewhere. Hitting the road wasn't the answer for either of them, except in the antiseptic regions of my imagination. But if anybody had the personal chemistry to make life with Celeste work out for the best, it was Annie.

It was the same moon I watched rise over the Harlem projects from Titty-who-can. There, by focusing my binoculars on the moon, I could make it appear vast in relation to the city, as if I wasn't on Earth at all but on another planet whose moon barely escaped from its gravity. Here though, I had to pick it out through the great mass of leaves overhead. If I strained to look, I could just make out one of Lake Zoar's silver twists far below.

It was while I stared at the silver lake from between the leaves that the blue girl, like a shining vapor, blew past me and ran into the darker woods.

I didn't know if I should run away, follow her, or sit where I was and just shit in my pants. It must have been the madness of the moonlight that got me off the stone and running after her through the woods. I didn't know that part of the woods well at all, and on several occasions I came close to tangling myself in black clouds of brambles or falling headfirst over fallen logs. The blue girl was too far ahead to be seen, and I couldn't hear a sound from her passage through the woods. Not one sound.

Suddenly, I was in this clearing. There was a small white church at the far end of a cemetery. The tombstones were streaked with the moon's light, odd shapes most of them, worn away by many changes of season.

There was no sign of the blue girl. For all I knew, she had sunk straight into the ground.

It was the night of the full moon, about midnight. I brought Jeremiah with me to Ward's place. We took his bike downtown. I think Mile Davis was having a party: sports cars and limos were all over the place.

Jeremiah didn't talk much, which bothered me.

"So, what's the plan with Ward?" I asked.

Jeremiah stopped at the foot of the stairs and looked me right in the eye. "I need to understand something," he said. "I'm changing inside and I don't know just how, and I don't know just why. I think it's for the better, though there are no guarantees as far as that goes. I need to find out. You and Ward are going to help me find out, tonight."

Eddie the monkey backed away from Jeremiah and ran back into his cage.

"Not very encouraging," Jeremiah said.

"Don't take it personally," Ward said. "Eddie's been acting strange all day."

"How are you feeling?" asked Jeremiah.

"It's odd, you know. I've been having strange dreams."

"What sort of dreams?"

"Dreams about my life before the accident. I seem to be reliving special moments like when I made out for the first time, and when I first drove alone after getting my license and the first time I won a sports award in high school. When the dreams start, I keep expecting them to torture me, that in my present condition those memories will destroy me. Instead, those dreams are wonderful. I love the escape from this chair for a few hours, even if the escape is only an

illusion. And when I wake up, I find I'm feeling great. I don't start moping about the past. I feel energized."

"That's very good to hear," said Jeremiah. "Very good."

"What I started to learn about magick many years ago, I found reflected in the discipline we call 'science'," said Jeremiah. "The true shaman is as empirical in his own medium as any scientific researcher. In fact, it's becoming well-documented that as the realms of science and mysticism approach their outer limits, they approach each other. Therefore, I concluded that the best approach to understanding the universe in its totality would be to have one foot in this reality, and one foot in . . . some other."

Jeremiah set up a mirror on the table in front of Ward's chair. On each side of it he set up some candles. Then he took a mixture of herbs out of a metal box and placed them in a small dish he set between the candles. The herbs smelled like the stuff Cassie gave me.

"Once I got started," he said, "many things started falling into place. For one thing, I began to bury old ghosts and skeletons that haunted my memories. I began to reach away from being isolated within myself and reach toward a shared existence with others. Many of the things I'd hoped I'd find in my isolation, I began to find among other people. I suppose if I were pinned down to define magick, I would say it's the ability to join with other people on all levels of being, and thereby effect certain changes among them."

He took out an egg and cracked it into another dish. Then he put the empty shells in the dish with the herbs and lit them. A blue plume rose straight up in front of the mirror. Then he lit the candles.

"Cassandra came into my life, then," he said. "She not only educated me, she empowered me. She freely gives me whatever energies she possesses. By giving, she grows stronger, she

receives." Again, he looked me straight in the eye. "That's the second lesson, my young friend," he said.

Then he dipped both hands into the egg, smearing both yolk and white on his fingers. He touched Ward's forehead and cheeks with the stuff.

"Voila," he said, directing Ward's eyes toward the mirror.

"There must've been hundreds of faces," Ward said. "I'd swear I saw hundreds."

My bowels still clenched.

"I never saw anything like that," I said. I could barely hear myself speak, though. I seemed to be hearing my voice whispering from a thousand miles away.

"I told you, gentlemen," said Jeremiah, "I don't fuck around. This is serious shit."

"Now what's supposed to happen?" Ward asked him.

"I don't know," Jeremiah said. "In some cultures they'd say that those were demons and that we exorcised them. Other cultures would maintain that those were the faces of the gods and that by calling them down from heaven and observing them with mortal eyes, we had become gods, ourselves. I don't know."

"Jeremiah," I said, "I hate to say it but hanging around you is starting to get kind of creepy."

"I should imagine," he said, packing up his gear. "Quite often shamans are forced to resign themselves to lives of terrible isolation."

"What I want to know, Jeremiah," said Ward, "is that it will make me well."

Jeremiah sat down on a chair directly in front of Ward and faced him.



"I don't understand the entire mechanism," he said, "but I'm certain that what happened tonight will make you well. Yes. You saw, yourself, how those faces started out demonic and ended up angelic. Yes, I think it will make you well. Does that mean it will make you walk again or move your arms? I can't say. You'd think so, wouldn't you? But maybe there's a different way for you to be well, Ward. In the end it won't really matter, will it, as long as you're truly well.

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Before we headed back uptown, we took the curves in Central Park. It had to be three in the morning, the park drives were mostly open roads except for the packs of cars gathered at each red light, and the air smelled like the city was a ripe fruit, full of sweet juices.

I had no idea what to say to Jeremiah, none whatsoever.

He respected my need for silence and just leaned into the curves, to the right, to the left, as exuberant as the throaty growl of his bike's engine.

The Slovaki brothers re-named their show "Polish Is Never a Second Language" when they went to a full hour's format. Jeremiah and I caught up with them at the studio while Mike was interviewing a woman named Ellen Bradley, who claimed to be a channeler. A channeler, as I understood it, conveyed messages from the beyond to this world while she was explaining about the 10 Angels of Uranus.

"You see," she was saying, "there are ascending levels of power on Uranus . . ."

"That's very true," Mike interrupted, "but, please excuse me, we seem to have an unexpected guest coming into the studio, Jeremiah Jaffee, the Upper West Side's one and only candidate for the Presidency of the United States. C'mon, grab a couple of seats . . ."

"Well, thank you, Mike," said Jeremiah. "I hate to interrupt . . ."

Mrs. Ellen Bradley didn't think too highly of our interrupting, either. There's nothing more annoying to a psychic than to be caught up short in the middle of a shtick. I mean, the 10 Angels of Uranus could be the embodiment of an important concept, something just oozing with cosmic significance. Besides, there has to be a long, slow climb toward credibility that every psychic has to maneuver through before dropping bombshells like the 10 Angels of Uranus. Nobody's going to pay any attention to you if you start first thing with a statement like that. And there we were, waved in rudely by Mr. Mike Slovaki right after she'd gone to all that trouble taking her audience that far.

Having visions doesn't, after all, necessitate being delusional. But it doesn't mean you're not delusional, either. A psychic's credibility is at least as important as his powers of clairvoyance.

Everybody shook hands while Mrs. Ellen Bradley forced a polite smile.

"Well now, Jeremiah," said Mike, "did you bring a puppet with you tonight?"

Mrs. Ellen Bradley did a slow burn. Upstaged by a puppet act! This would be the last time she ever humiliated herself on public access . . .

"Well, Mike, yes I do have a puppet with me . . . But I really find Mrs. Bradley's 10 Angels of Uranus far more interesting. Could you please continue . . .?"

Mrs. Ellen Bradley didn't know how to take that. Was Jeremiah being chivalrous or was he just not letting her off the hook. She became flustered.

"Well, yes, the 10 Angels of Uranus, you see, uh... of course ..."

"I've had several out-of-body experiences, myself," he said, trying to pick up her slack. "They've all been comparatively mundane, however. I've never gone far from the vicinity of my body, you see. A matter of yards, maybe, and no more. This business of traveling to other planets, now I've heard about that, and I certainly envy you your ability to do it."

"Well, uh, thank you . . ." said Mrs. Ellen Bradley.

"You've had out-of-body experiences Jeremiah?" asked Mike. "Wow. Can you tell us about them?"

"Well, now, they're kind of private . . ."

"Aw c'mon."

"Mike, Mike, it's really no big deal. It's just displaced consciousness, sort of similar to a dream but verifiably real. You can look around, you can see yourself where you really are, you float around a little. No big deal. Now this business about the 10 Angels of Uranus . . . that's something!"

It didn't turn out to be one of Mrs. Ellen Bradley's better nights.

A rooster crowed on 126th Street. I couldn't believe my ears. The world was going crazy all around me, my best friend, Jeremiah Jaffee, was going to be wearing a headdress and banging tom-toms within the week, gris-gris bags were turning up all over the Upper West Side, Harlem, City Hall, and Wall Street, and now I was hearing roosters on 126th.

"Fighting cocks," Jeremiah said. "They're cheaper to keep in the warehouses around here than dogs. Here, this is my cab."

I sat up front with him. We headed straight for Tudor City without stopping for any fares.

"He says the job's impossible," Jeremiah said. "That's what attracted me in the first place. We'll make a couple of hundred, too, and that's a fair piece of change for an hour's work. Then we cruise."

I admit the job looked impossible to me too, at first. Some old lady had come from France to live with her granddaughter on the 8th floor and she brought with her a Louis the Something couch, fully crated. The damn thing had to be ten feet long and almost four feet wide. It was built nobly, designed to be carried just as nobly through wide-open French doors into an elegant first floor salon. Not *schlepped* around New York and transplanted in an 8th floor apartment. We double-checked getting it into the elevator and up the stairs, but no luck.

I suggested a helicopter with rope and tackle or possibly a crane. Jeremiah shook his head. "That would take all the challenge out of it," he said.

Jeremiah surveyed the situation, stroking his beard. With my suggestions dismissed out of hand, my thoughts returned to Smitty the pimp and the vengeance I'd take.

"Isn't it something what some folks'll choose to waste their money on," said the doorman. He was an old white man, tall and lanky with the furrowed cheeks and flaccid chin of a lost soul. "Maybe you should take it outta the box and saw off the legs. Then it might fit up the stairs."

"Thanks for the suggestion," said Jeremiah, "but this couch is insured for more than you or I'll ever be. I don't think the old lady will appreciate our effort."

The doorman shrugged, then picked up the newspaper. "Just tryin' to help," he said.

"You want to help?" said Jeremiah. "Do you have the elevator door key?"

"Yeah."

"Terrific. Our problem's solved. Let me have it, please."

This caught my interest. Jeremiah dropped the elevator to the basement and opened the lobby door onto the shaft. "What we're going to do," he explained, "is tilt the crate up and set it on end on top of the elevator. I'll get on top first and guide it up."

Now, it wasn't easy but it worked. With a lot of grunting and sweating we stood the crate on its end, careful to avoid the cables and electrical components. I had never seen the inside of an elevator shaft before. It smelled of gear oil.

Jeremiah rode the elevator up, steadying the crate, while I ran upstairs to meet him on the 8th floor. He stopped at 7 and I opened the door with the key. The doorman came along to satisfy his curiosity.

"I never woulda believed it," the old man said.

Once we hoisted the crate out of the shaft, it was a piece of cake getting it into the apartment. The old lady was overjoyed. She paid cash and added a large tip.

We made it out to the cab sooner than we expected. "Emess Inc" was stenciled on the front doors. It was one of those Checkers with drop seats and a plexiglass partition behind the driver. "If I ever buy a car of my own," Jeremiah said, "it'll be a Checker. I love 'em."

We buckled our seatbelts and Jeremiah set out his changer and trip card. He hustled right and left to make up for lost time. While we were driving this mother and daughter team to Bloomingdale's, Jeremiah said, "That's the third lesson."

"What?" I asked.

"You have to know when to use magick," he said, "and when to use good ol' American ingenuity."

It wasn't more than a couple of days later when Jeremiah took me downtown for a meeting with Harry Hull and Father Terry at the Club Q. Meyer saw us emerge from the subway and came running over.

"Did you call her?" I asked.

"Yes, of course!" he said. He was beaming. "She's meeting me this evening. For coffee!"

He took a folded sheet out of his pocket.

"I brought this for her to read," he said. "I wrote it years ago, but, oddly enough, I still like it."

It was titled, "Armorer":

My people were the armorers for kings.  
We burrowed underground for the finest lumps of ore,  
and worked the bellows at the forge  
and hammered iron braids over and over  
into broadswords, daggers, dirks . . .  
The arms that wielded those weapons  
have long since crumbled to dust,  
the causes forgotten, the reputations lost.  
Still, we burrow underground.  
The ore we seek eludes us.  
We do odd jobs to while away the time.  
As for me, I will not rest  
until I forge a sword from moonlight,  
a buckler from the soul of Man.

"I think she'll really like it," said Jeremiah. "Dionysia appreciates poetry."

Meyer folded the poem carefully and put it back in his pocket.

The side of his head was still swollen and bruised. He had enough working against him in the looks department, he didn't need further decoration.

"Has that prick been bothering you lately?" I asked him. I had racked my brain for methods of revenge but hadn't yet managed to settle on anything that was sufficiently efficient and cruel.

"That's what I wanted to show you," Meyer said, handing me an article ripped out of the morning paper. "I've always maintained that those who live by the sword, die by the sword."

The article said, briefly, that Smitty the pimp had been bound and gagged and tied to the top of the elevator in his ritzy apartment house. No one could say how long he had to wait for the first rooftop ride to finish him off, but eventually the blood gummed up the mechanism and shorted the system. That's how they found him.

My gut wrenched and the short hairs of my neck rose. Jeremiah looked away and started off toward Club Q.

I caught up with him.

"Coincidence," I said, "magick, or American ingenuity?"

"Lesson #4," he said. "Never waste magick on a shmuck."



"I had a dream," said Farber. "Did I talk? Did I say anything?"

"No," I said, "you didn't."

"I thought I might've. Do you want to hear about my dream?"

Farber, Farber, Farber. I've heard dreams told by the best of them. Sit around until 3AM with Jeremiah or Bo Lumen or Dom Mirandola discussing dream states and doorways into transcendent realities and you'll never want to fall asleep again. Thank God when I'm asleep, I'm asleep. I don't dream, I don't leave my body, I don't visit other planets or fall into fissures between space and time. There are no thin grey men with messages for me or celestial music that I wake up humming or impatient poets revealing the hiding places of their lost manuscripts. When I'm asleep, it's just darkness and rest, a revitalizing gap in the progress of my day. That's all.

"I'd love to," I said.

"There was this white light at the end of a long dark tunnel --"

Jeremiah brought Hobart and me up to Dom's place for an experiment.

"My curiosity has gotten the better of me," Dom said, "as I'm sure you knew it would, Jeremiah. Very cunning of you to leave that sample. It's been like meeting one's great-great-great grandson for the first time. A wayward grandson, I must say. It's disconcerting to find it being vended on the black market as if it were a mere euphoric, but such, I suppose, are the exigencies of life. I must accept my own responsibility for that, as well. I knew all along that I was abandoning that line of research too soon, leaving it in competent although less scrupulous hands. I was so absorbed in my colloidal data research, why, the recollection of those years is like one furious ecstasy, and all-consuming inferno of experimentation, trial and error, twenty cul-de-sacs evaded for each open door. I no longer had time for biological processes, the germination of seeds, the cross-breeding, the genetic charting. Most of that was left to my graduate students while I, myself, disappeared more and more into the confines of my physics laboratory, intent upon my colloids and my energy transfer states."

Hobart looked at me dubiously. The good doctor held several blue-tinged buds up to the light.

"The errors of our youth rise up to haunt us," he said.

"Shadows," Farber said, "like people only thinner, stretched out of shape. I remember thinking that I'd meet somebody I knew, somebody from out of my past, somebody long since dead. As I walked closer to get a better look, the shadows kept moving back and forth minding their own business, as if I wasn't even there. I didn't think at any time that I was dead, mind you, and that I might be joining those shadows on a permanent basis. Somehow, I knew better."

He stopped to gulp some air. I could see the effort to tell me the dream was killing him.

"Slow down, Farber," I said. "Take a nap. Finish the story later. You and I have all the time in the world in this joint."

But he was already unconscious.

Hobart went along with everything well enough until it came to pasting the electrodes on his head.

"Listen," he said, "I don't know about this experiment of yours. I mean, I usually try and keep electricity and my brain as far apart as possible. Maybe I should just sit and watch you, Jeremiah."

My fingers were gummy with electrolytic paste. The wired pads dangled from them as I waited for Hobart's final decision.

"Hobart," said Jeremiah, "you'll kick yourself in the ass if you crap out now. Nothing's going to hurt you. Machines like this have been around for years aiding people in reducing their level of brainwave function from alpha to theta . . ."

"I like my brainwaves right where they are, thank you."

"Ok, ok, have it your way. Sit back and watch me. But if I'm right . . . why, a musician of your caliber could tap into the same cosmic energies that were responsible for making Bach and Mozart and Beethoven the geniuses they were."

"Jeremiah," Dom interrupted, "you're being hyperbolic. Don't confuse your friend with your own lack of perspective. This is an experiment. True, it should be harmless. But as for what you will gain from it, we can't say as yet. Obviously, candidate Jaffee has his theories . . ."

"Dom, it's a working hypothesis backed by intuition," said Jeremiah. "I have strong feelings about where the combination of Blue Lotus and your colloidal whatever machine will take us. Anyway, Hobart, you're free to back out. Of course. And no hard feelings."

Hobart looked at me with my treasure of sticky wires and pads, like some glistening catch of the day. I simply shrugged.

"Bach . . .?" Hobart mused. I could see Jeremiah had scored. "Ah, go ahead, stick 'em on."

When I was finished, they both looked like squids washed up from the sea. They settled back in their stuffed chairs and closed their eyes.

"Ready?" the good doctor asked, his finger hovering near the switch.

"Banzai!" said Jeremiah, and he downed the blue liquid.

The camcorder was rolling and I set the timer as per Dom's instructions. Hobart eyed the blue liquid in the little plastic cup, shaking his head.

"*G'zai gesund!*" he said at last, and scarfed down every last drop.

Farber's back on tube feeding. I wonder if the doctors and nurses and aides milling around him had anything to do with the shadows in his dream.

I wonder if he's starting his dream from scratch. Back down the tunnel, that long slow walk toward the white light and the shadows . . .

Having lived through all I've lived through, I can't help but wonder if those shadows aren't more real than our substance.

I can't help but wonder, if Farber makes it all the way to the shadows, if he'll even want to come back.

Hobart and Jeremiah snapped awake at the exact same time. I looked at the timer: 138 minutes, 11 seconds.

"Did you . . .?" asked Jeremiah. He seemed astonished.

"Yeah," said Hobart. "And you?"

"Sonofabitch, I was right there with you!"

"Christ," Hobart said, "that was fucking unbelievable."

"Gentlemen," said Dom Mirandola, "please don't keep us in suspense. What happened?"

Hobart started pulling off the electrodes.

"The CIA's gonna want to get its hands on this shit," he said, shaking his finger at the good doctor.

"That's it!" said Jeremiah. "That's probably what happened to your friend, Needham."

"May he rest in peace," Hobart concluded.

§

-- Gris-gris, gris-gris, gris-gris, gris-gris, gris-gris --

Jeremiah kept his puppets in a plastic portfolio slung over his shoulder. As we walked down the dormitory corridor to Danny Long's room, the bag squeaked. We knocked on his door but he made no sound.

"Danny," said Jeremiah, "I've got something for you. Let me in."

We could hear Danny mumble something very softly, so Jeremiah opened the door just a bit. Danny was sitting at a small table looking out the window, not much concerned that our heads were already in his room, so we walked in.

Jeremiah sat down across from Danny, I sat on his bed.

"How's it going, Danny?" Jeremiah asked.

Danny looked out the window, barely smiling. He never gave anyone eye contact, no matter how often you spoke to him. He'd let you read him stories for awhile, and he'd listen to music if you brought a cassette player into his room with you. Not for too long, though. He had a low tolerance for people. After awhile he'd start mumbling under his breath and pulling his long, shaggy hair back from his forehead, over and over again. That was the sign that it was time to pack up your gear and move on.

"I want you to check this out," Jeremiah said.

He put the portfolio on the table between them and dug through it. The puppet he pulled out was a new one with long, shaggy hair. Its eyes were bright and painted straight forward, as if happily astonished.

One middle finger was carved much too long.

"That puppet's for you," said Jeremiah, handing it to him. "I'd like you to try it on."



Danny let the puppet rest on his palm. I watched him stare directly into its exaggerated eyes.

"See," said Jeremiah, taking another puppet out of the bag, "you put it on like this."

The puppet had a beard, a hat with a drooping brim and a gold hoop in its left ear, just like Jeremiah. It, too, had exaggerated, staring eyes. He held it and made it bow and move its arms.

He helped put Danny's puppet on the hand without the finger. He set his fingers in straight so he could make the arms move and the head.

"There you go," he said. "That's how you do it."

Danny kept staring down at the puppet on his good hand, making it move and then looking out the window and then turning back to it again and making it move. Jeremiah brought his puppet up close to the other. He made it wave.

"Hi, Danny," he said, without trying to disguise his voice. "It's good seeing you again. I like coming up here to visit you. I like it when we talk and you can tell me stories. Would you like to tell me a story? I told one last time. Your turn."

Danny stared hard at the puppets, then turned to look out the window.

Jeremiah leaned a little forward and said, "Danny. Look at me."

By God if Danny didn't look him right in the eye. A long probing look.

"That's great," Jeremiah said. "You did fine. We'll keep practicing with these puppets and maybe someday you'll say 'Hi' back to me."

Danny turned and looked out the window again.

We left the room.

-- Gris-gris, gris-gris, gris-gris, gris-gris, gris-gris --

I caught up to Twyla at the washing machine. It was off-balance, somehow, and was making a horrible squeak. She was on her knees trying to fix it and keep her conversation going with the state inspector at the same time.

"We've graduated 30 students back to their home communities in just the last two years," she said. "I refuse to turn this place into a little institution. We work with each one, train a staff advocate, and send both of them out to the public school and the home community as quickly as possible. The advocate trains the family and the teachers and, when it's time, comes back here. And you bureaucrats save years of residential costs and special tuition."

She worked a shim under the base of the washer and the noise softened.

"Better," she said, standing up, "but it still needs fixing." She took out this little notebook she carried with her at all times and jotted in it.

"We have the finest school of its kind in the state and you know it," she said, looking down into the inspector's face. "And now you want to give us a deficiency because you don't like our data review format? Let me tell you something . . ."

*Tell me something, Twyla, I thought to myself, tell me that you love me and tell me you want to give me some of your priestess-wisdom. Tell me that you want me in your bed and that you'll teach me how to make our bodies sing and how to forget young girls and their stupid frivolous arrogant ways.*

Tell me something, Twyla.

Don't waste time with assholes.

" . . . you're the fourth inspector in as many years, and each of you has his own ideas about format. The format you dislike is your predecessor's brainchild and I told him when he mandated it that it was inadequate but that didn't matter. Now your scheme, while it makes up for some of his deficient thinking, is riddled with deficient thinking of its own. So I'll tell you what," she said confidentially, pulling him closer to her by his elbow, "we're going to develop our own format, because we're better at it than you and you folks are just going to have to live with it. Save your formats and treatment regimens for the warehouses *you* run."

Twyla was definitely gorgeous when she was upset: flashing eyes, aristocratic chin, the works.

"And if you feel compelled to continue to torment us," she said, "I'll have every TV news service in the state compare your hell-holes to this school in terms of both direct educational benefit to the students and cost-effectiveness. Do I make myself clear?"

She looked at me briefly, then behind me. I turned and saw D-J leaning against the wall, smiling. He brought his open right palm down from his lips to his other hand and then pressed his wrists together, the sign for "good work."

Twyla nodded and smiled.

" . . . I don't mean for you to construe this as an adversarial relationship . . ." the inspector was saying, his tone of voice dripping with sweat.

She turned her back on him and walked to her office.

-- Gris-gris, gris-gris, gris-gris, gris-gris, gris-gris --

The crickets made Bo Lumen's cabin in the woods noisier than our places back in the city. It was a pleasant and soothing drone, though, like the throb of a beating heart.

We were discussing the little girl's blue ghost.

"That was Lurinda," said Bo. "I've seen her many times. We've become rather good friends."

The short hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

"Sometimes she stands right over there and just stares at me," said Bo, pointing to the fringe of scrub just past his small garden. "Like a chipmunk or a squirrel waiting for peanuts. Sometimes she walks right past me, as if I weren't watching her at all, very determined to get where she's going. The locals say she's looking for some way to bring her headstone back to her body where it lies under the lake. Personally, I think she's after more than that."

"Like what?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," said Bo. "But I've noticed she's very much like the kids at the Cuahla School. She seems to need to tell me something, yet only has the vaguest recollection of how we living beings communicate with one another. She can stare at me uncomprehendingly, as if I were the disembodied apparition and she the living mortal. It's either my poor powers of observation, coupled with my lack of insight, that have kept me from reading her cues correctly, or the time simply isn't right. One day I'm confident she'll finally get through my thick skull what it is that will enable her spirit to rest."

"I can't believe I'm hearing you right," I said. "I was comfortable telling myself it was all an hallucination, you know, something draining down from the hills in the drinking water that made me see things. Now you tell me she's a real ghost."

Bo laughed.

"This is Lake Zoar," he said. "What other places have for legends and folklore, Lake Zoar has for its reality. UFOs, the salamander in the flame . . . this place has it all."

Bo re-lit his pipe. Jeremiah had his feet up on the porch rail, staring at the sky full of stars.

Suddenly Jeremiah said, "I think I might have a way for you to speak to her."

"Really?" said Bo. "Well, if anyone would, it would be Cassandra's High Priest."

"Mr. Jaffee," said Fogg, "no matter how successful you are in this campaign, you're just an amateur. Keep that in mind."

Fogg spilled out of the roof door like a bad dream in blue silk.

Jeremiah put both barbells down on the tarpaper. "I assume with a prelude like that," he said, "you're going to tell me something that will make me flush with admiration. What coup did you pull off?"

Fogg stared in amazement at the Titty-who-can Guerrilla Gym, mopping his forehead and neck with a handkerchief.

"How the fuck can you guys lift weights in this heat?" he said. "It's gotta be 120° up here!"

"We're trying to get my bodyguard in shape," said Jeremiah. "Olaf, I'd like you to meet Mr. Fogg."

Olaf Wolinski worried more about the barbell crushing his voicebox than about social amenities. I spotted, and I was going to give him just 3 more seconds to get it up on his own.

"Bodyguard!" said Fogg. "Jesus, Mr. Jaffee, I don't want to disillusion you but you're not that important yet to warrant a bodyguard."

"Maybe so," said Jeremiah. "But I like to plan ahead. Besides, Olaf gives my bike a good polish. He's a good kid to have around."

His arms were giving out, so I tugged up on the bar slowly, making sure he still had plenty of resistance. A noise came out of his throat that was half groan and half choke. The bar rocked a bit as it dropped onto the bench stirrups.

"Not bad, Olaf," said Jeremiah. "Isn't this better than a life of crime?"

"Yeh," he said in a dying voice, "yeh. Whatever you say ..."

"Now, Mr. Fogg," said Jeremiah, "what's the good news?"

"Well, you see," said Fogg, "I figured I'd play up on your interest in that school you visit, so I arranged to have retarded people canvass the Upper West Side for signatures. They're also collecting cash for their group home fund or whatever they call it while they're at it."

"Kill two birds with one stone, eh?" I said.

"Exactly!"

"Except you can't do that," said Jeremiah. "The group home could lose its non-profit status."

"Yeah? And what if I told you that it's all just a job for them, a strictly business arrangement, because Candidate Jaffee could've hired just anybody off the street but he figured that if somebody's gotta be paid for canvassing, it might as well be some folks who could use the compensation most."

"Paid? Out of what money?" asked Jeremiah.

"Well, not money exactly," said Fogg. "I prefer to use the barter system."

"O you do?" said Jeremiah. "And what am I giving them in return?"

"Something they'll appreciate much more than hard currency," said Fogg. "A puppet show."

"Well," said Jeremiah with a big grin, "I am impressed, Mr. Fogg."

"Thank you," said Fogg, with an exaggerated bow. "Like I said, I'm good at what I do. And I always make it a point to make the campaign fit the candidate." He sat on the parapet and lit a cigar. "I'll admit you're a challenge, though. I've run campaigns out of smoke-filled rooms,

dope-filled rooms, cash-filled rooms . . . this'll be the first time I've got to strategize around a puppet-theater. . ."

Jeremiah picked up the barbells again.

"I have every confidence in your capacity for creative campaigning," he said.

"Well, then," said Fogg, "there you have it. I'll take off now, and get back to you later with the details." He took one last look around and shook his head. "You guys work up a good sweat, now, y'hear?"

Then he headed for the door. It suddenly swung open and there was Hobart staring him right in the face, carrying his French horn.

"Jesus Christ," Fogg said, "this joint's a fuckin' nuthouse."

"Well, fuck you, too, man," said Hobart, "whoever you are."

"No, look, pal, I didn't mean it personally, I --" Their looks hung together in space, dangling in that silent void which accompanies a mutual loss for words, "Ah, never mind," Fogg said finally, and he hurried past Hobart and down the stairs.

"What's with him?" asked Hobart.

Jeremiah shrugged. "I guess he just can't take the heat..."



§

Father Terry was at prayer, so we waited in his office. It looked like the back room of a thrift shop: books and papers scattered all over the place, a cheap tin desk facing three just as cheap folding chairs, a telephone buried in piles of brochures, rosters, program clipboards, and incoming correspondence, and a few statuettes of saints. On the walls without shelves were photos of Father Terry and some of the politicians who came by once in a while to shake his hand.

"I have to be honest with you, Jeremiah," I said. "I don't like politics, I don't trust politicians or the political processes they invent, and, as far as I'm concerned, I respected you more as a puppeteer than as a Presidential candidate."

"You know," Jeremiah said, "I'm almost 40 years old, yet I don't think I'll ever outgrow the need to justify what I do to an old friend who's got concerns. At least I'll give it a shot. What's eating you?"

"Jean Luc's grandfather went back to New Orleans," I said. "He knows you're fucking around with voodoo and it scares the shit out of him. Sure, he's seen his grandson grow up a lot in the past few weeks, but he says voodoo is voodoo and that's that. And I'm not sure I don't agree."

Jeremiah waited. "What else?" he said, finally.

"I don't trust that Fogg guy. I know you mean well but I don't know that he means well. I worry that he's one of those lost souls walking a long road to nowhere and that he's going to take you with him. I don't want him twisting you out of what you are and turning you into his kind of guy."

Jeremiah waited some more. "Anything else?" he said.

"I'm thinking."

"I'll wait."

But that about covered it, at least as far as I felt comfortable discussing with him. It was obvious Cassie had taken over his heart, hook, line and sinker, and I couldn't bring myself to raise doubts regarding how healthy it might be for him to be around her. She was a fascinating woman, hypnotic like a cobra just before it strikes. I know this sounds awful about someone who had done nothing but favors for me, who treated me like a brother and shared her enthusiasms for plants and needle-point and choreography with me without any hesitation or holding anything back. I couldn't figure out, myself, what had me spooked about her, so I didn't want to confuse the issues I already raised by flopping around in a mudhole of babbling incoherence.

"Well," said Jeremiah. "First of all, I need to tell you that I appreciate your friendship. Not all friends share the bad as well as the good, and I respect that. It's also important for me to know what's worrying you, so I can set your mind at rest."

However, Father Terry chose that moment to come into the room. Jeremiah signed to me that he wasn't about to let the issues drop, and said, "Hello, Father. I need your spiritual counsel. Do you have a minute?"

Father Terry seemed amused. "Hello, Jeremiah. Do you really think a minute will suffice? I'd be very disappointed."

"Ah, Father, you've got me pegged. I'm a sinful man, a sinner both in the flesh and in the spirit. But I also have some good points."

"One or two, I'm sure, Jeremiah. How may I counsel you?"

"Father, I intend to marry Cassandra Sharpe."

My bowels clenched so hard I almost farted.

"She doesn't know it yet," said Jeremiah, "but she knows I love her and I know she loves me. She's a very special person, Father, and I mean that literally. Maybe Harry told you something about her: she dances across the street."

Father Terry didn't quite scowl, but I could see he was within himself about something unpleasant.

"Are you looking for someone to officiate at your wedding?" he asked. "Because if you are --"

"No, Father. We have no desire to get married in the Catholic Church and I would never presume to ask you to compromise yourself by performing a non-Catholic ceremony. No, I'd certainly like you to come to the wedding when it occurs, but as a guest, and a friend."

"Then how may I counsel you?" The priest seemed relieved.

"You know," said Jeremiah, "I came here originally to pass on these papers from the Cuahla School regarding Annie's performance. Twyla and D-J told me to make sure I emphasized how much she's grown while tending those students. She's found rich inner resources, Father, that make her compassionate toward what she initially found ugly and horrifying. Twyla says she's learned to find beauty in ugliness, and consequently finds a lot more beauty in herself. That's what I came here to talk about.

"However, one of my best friends shared some of his fears with me. He's genuinely frightened for the sake of my soul and I'd like to put his fears to rest. Right now he probably figures you'd be the last one to help me do that, considering the nature of the current influences on my life."

"And they are?" asked the priest.

"Father, I've become a sorcerer. A shaman."

Father Terry sat back in his chair and tapped his fingers together.

"I make magick, Father. I've had many teachers over the years. Cassie's taught me. My father, Harry, taught me. Twyla and D-J are first-rate magicians. Harry Hull shows great promise. Bo Lumen, I don't know, he's gone beyond magic to absolute transcendence out there in the woods.

"And you've taught me, Father. I've watched you counsel children and I've watched you pray. You, and other religious, have been great teachers of mine. That's why I'm hoping you'll be able to set my friend's mind at rest."

"I don't know that I'll be able to do that, Jeremiah," said the priest.

"Father, last year I watched the Pope perform midnight mass on Christmas Eve. That moment when he elevated the chalice as high as he could reach over his bowed head, I almost wept. It was in that moment that the Pope, a human being like each of us, a man with a childhood and sexual fantasies and a need to shit and piss like the rest of us, bore the collective urgings of 100 million Catholics in his soul and plucked God out of the sky and turned wine into his blood. That's why I figured you'd understand the magick I'm talking about and help me find words to help my friend understand, too."

I was amazed to hear Jeremiah talk like that, yet something wonderful seemed to be ringing above and between his words, like the tonal qualities of a great golden horn.

Father Terry picked up on it, too. He even smiled.

"I will say this much, Jeremiah," he said. "I fully appreciate the equivalence you make between religious ritual and magic. I also understand that you use the word 'magic' in a sense

that is meant to be neither demeaning to religion nor Satanic. I believe you are not an evil person, and I pray I'm right. If this is of any comfort to your friend, you're welcome to it.

"I will remind you of something, though. Since you are knowledgeable in regard to shamans and magicians, you must know that the essence of all religious apprehensions--of transcendent moments of magic, if you will--occur above and beyond the matters of the everyday world. Shamans, the same as priests, need to be to some great measure isolate from the regular rhythms of life. I, for example, have been forced to free myself from sexual attachments and to live a closely regulated life of ritual and missionary service. Shamans of other faiths, and I won't denigrate them with the term 'pagans', likewise lived in isolation and frenzy, tormented by the obligations put upon them by their vision of the divine. Being at one with God is both a fierce ecstasy and a terribly responsibility. This may be forgotten when one both practices 'magic' as you call it and lives as just one man among his fellow men.

"That's when evil can creep in, Jeremiah. One's ego can be moulded and prodded by the thoughts and drives of those we love and those we hate. The shaman who works his magic amidst the river of life, takes many risks. In a sense we priests have taken an easy way out: by limiting our opportunities in life, we can sustain our souls with the simpler rituals of our faith. We rarely fight those great battles between absolute good and absolute evil. Those who do are saints, not priests. But those who do it while living absolutely among their fellow men, while courting extraordinary dangers, could, I would imagine, create an extraordinary union between all men and God, what you would call extraordinary 'magic'."

Jeremiah was deep in thought for a long time. As for me, I had nothing to say, either. I couldn't say a single word, I was suddenly so much in love with the priest, and Jeremiah, and Cassandra and the whole round and spinning world. For the first time in my life I actually felt

God's presence in the things of this world, and heard His voice reverberating in the words of the priest.

Jeremiah had gotten what he wanted.

There would be risks, but quite possibly they were worth taking.

"Thank you, Father," Jeremiah said at last. "You've taught me a great lesson. And --" He looked at me and I smiled and gave him the ok high-sign. "You've helped put a good man's heart at ease."

"I'm pleased," said Father Terry. "I would be happy to be a guest at your wedding."

§

"It disturbs me to the very center of my soul," said Jeremiah, "that an asshole like you can find anything in my position statements to endorse. Whatever I have said or written in the past that has encouraged you to think I represent your way of thinking, I hereby renounce and rescind. My hand to God on that!"

The nazi skinhead stood at the microphone with his jaw hanging down to his Adam's apple. Then his eyes narrowed and he clenched his fists.

"Go on," said Mike Slovaki, "get outta here!"

The crowd in the gallery hooted the skinhead down while Noodles and Antoine dollied the cameras to cover his compadres climbing over the rest of the audience to get Jeremiah.

"You see?" shouted Jeremiah, standing on his chair. "We are animals, all of us. Our flesh is the flesh of brutes!"

"Jew!" yelled the attacking skinheads. "Jew-kike-bastard-sonofabitch!"

"Aha!" shouted Jeremiah and he began to chant, "*Sh'ma yisroel adonai elohenu. . .*"

Olaf, Mike and I were out of our seats playing defensive center against the onslaught. Olaf, being new at the bodyguard business and by nature a timid sort of guy, took a headbutt to the face and went down for the count. Mike and I threw ourselves bodily onto the nearest invaders.

"*ADONAI ECHOD!!!*"

And Jeremiah leaped into the middle of the mass of clutching hands that itched to tear him apart.

After the fight, there was free soda for everybody. To the victors belonged the spoils.

Noodles and Antoine kept the cameras rolling by pummeling skinheads with baseball bats. The cable station's security force, which had been beefed up by the management with moonlighting bouncers from the Blue Eye Burlesk due to PNSL's phenomenal success, took care of business with a high degree of professionalism: no unnecessary roughness, just tight strongarm holds and a shove out the emergency exit. Jean Luc, in cloak and dashiki, waded into the fray with a few friends from the Projects. And the rest of the audience, mostly partisan to Jeremiah's Radical Humanist politics, barraged the skinheads with boots, shoes and folding chairs.

But what I could see of Jeremiah, through a tangle of arms, legs, tattoos, safety pins and skinheads, was truly inspirational.

Ah, to have had Meyer's talent for poetic economy of phrase and image: I would have composed a warrior's ode, a narrative of epic proportions, a pentameter paean to the valor of the Righteous Warrior doing battle with forces of injustice, Godlessness, and raw evil. "Yes, yes," Jeremiah told me afterwards, "I felt the blood of my noblest forebears running through my veins, the blood of Bar Kochba and the Maccabees, of Judah the Lion and David the King, of Samson and Joshua and the martyrs of Massada and Warsaw." To try and put into words without the Gift of the Muse how the skinheads fell, one after the other, under Jeremiah's heavy fists would be to diminish the sublimity of the moment and render cheap and crass what was a truly noble experience.

Thank God Noodles and Antoine captured it on videotape!



Following the Rout of the Skinheads, Jeremiah proceeded with his presentation.

"Actually," he said, "what happened tonight just goes to prove my point. Look at us. Look at what happened here and what we did. Is there any more telling evidence that we are spirits of infinite potential trapped in shells of flesh bred for uncounted generations to survive and breed through the medium of fang and claw? Having come out on top, I'll admit I loved every minutes of it. My spiritual part loved the clear-cut triumph of right over might, and my fleshly part loved the crunch of bone under my fists.

"Is this all that God intended for us?

"I've searched all my life for an answer to that question. What I couldn't find in synagogue or church, I looked for in the temples and shrines of the East, in the writings of philosophers throughout all cultures and all eras, in the raw groping of man for God with totems and totems, and in the refined sophistication of art and enterprise. What coven and Sabbath lacked, I searched for in technology and quantum physics. I have tried to temper my soul through acts of charity and greed, through self-flagellation and euphoria, through lust and chastity, through satiation and fasting, through turning the other cheek and wreaking vengeance, through cunning and naive simplicity.

"And the bottom line is that I'm convinced that mankind's spiritual part can transcend the physical blueprint bred in our genes and, through many diverse means, rise and meet God face-to-face.

"Have I done so? No, my friends, not yet. But, as James Joyce would say, I'm 'almosting' it.

"Which brings me to tonight's performance...

"My friend and colleague in this search, Ms. Cassandra Sharpe, has adapted a work of mine designed for shadow-puppetry and choreographed it into her magnum opus, 'Meshe in Blue Minor', a dance piece based on Bach's 'Mass in B Minor'. What she and her troupe will present tonight in a live TV premiere will be sections 3, 4 and 5, the Keyrie Eleison, the Gloria, and the Laudamus. These sections best convey, she feels, the transcendence of mankind's spiritual attributes over the genetic mechanisms for the survival of the species and the flesh.

"Without further preamble, then, I'd like to present Ms. Cassandra Sharpe and her Blue Eye Dancers in the remarkable 'Meshe in Blue Minor'."

The cameras drew back and focused on the rear stage. Everyone was silent as the background slowly brightened from black to an eerie electric blue. First faintly then increasingly loudly rose the tender strains of music as the dancers walked in unison onto center stage. The emptiness of the background was soon broken by scaffolding and mesh nets and thick ropes hanging from ceiling girders above the studio lights, as they were moved into place by concealed prop men, the bouncers from the Blue Eye. What appeared as the silhouettes of five dancers split into ten and then rejoined as five in a choreographed simulation of the splitting of the soul into the physical and the astral. The dancers moved with grace and dignity among the various pieces of equipment: sliding like snakes down the ropes without using their hands or feet but simply by wrapping their bodies in deft and elegant postures: mounting the nets in pairs or singly and assuming the mid-air attitudes of spirits living in the realm between the physical plane and the eternal and unchanging realm of God's ecstasy of love: drifting down invisible plastic tubes like souls being born through the umbilicus of time and space ...

The audience went wild. Nothing like it had ever been seen before.

Then Mike opened the phone lines for viewer feedback. The first call made my bowels clench.

At first I thought there was something wrong with the phone system. There was a dull throbbing drone in the background, like the blast of an open furnace. And the caller's voice seemed to come not from the telephone speaker but from the very walls and floor and ceiling of the studio.

"I am Satan," the caller said in a raspy, degenerate voice," and I am preparing a special fire in Hell for you, Mr. Jeremiah Jaffee."

And the line went dead.

Jeremiah sat back in his chair and said nothing. He just stroked his beard.

"You want perfect proof?" said Jeremiah. "I'll give you perfect proof."

Farber, you and I could use some of that Blue Lotus concoction along about now. I never thought back then that I should have stashed some in a safe place for the future. When you're young and vigorous, death seems a fairy-tale told to children by old folks to frighten them into living the same sort of mediocre lives they did. Back then, I figured if death were to come to me at all, if I weren't destined to be among the first generation of human immortals, it would be sudden and spectacular. In spite of working among people whose bodies were in one way or another wasting away on a daily basis, I never emotionally accepted that sort of withering could be in store for me.

O well. Live and learn, Farber, I always say.

The good doctor expressed some obligatory warnings. "We don't know what the long-term effects might be," he said. "This method of spontaneous research is frowned upon by the scientific establishment, to say the least. Not that I'm deterred by that. By God, it feels good to be back in the research fray after too many years wasted on inconsequential. But you need to understand up front that, if word of these experiments leaks out, both Jeremiah and I will be subject to the censure and persecution of the orthodoxy. Even if we're successful, the research may be discontinued in spite of your protests."

"Doctor Mirandola," said Ward, "it's inconceivable to me that any sort of long-term side-effects would stop me from participating. As for the orthodoxy, let them go to Hell."

"Terrific," said Jeremiah, "Eddie, fill the cup."

There were six of us that day: Ward, Jeremiah, Dom the Doc, Hobart, me and Mr. Fogg. Olaf, who was nursing a very swollen face, stayed by Jeremiah's bike because none of us trusted his big mouth. Fogg was the skeptic. He happened to call Jeremiah that morning regarding some forms that needed to be filed and was sucked into the experiment as the control.

Jeremiah promised him perfect proof.

Eddie leaped off his perch on the radio transmitter and emptied some of the blue liquid into a plastic cup. He carried it across the room without spilling a drop and tilted it between Ward's lips. The good doctor turned on the portable version of his brainwave device.

"C'mon," said Jeremiah, "it's time for your perfect proof."

I looked out the window and watched him and Fogg argue. It seems that Fogg refused to ride on the back of the motorcycle, so Jeremiah made him pay for the cab. They were gone almost an hour and a half.

In the meantime, had Ward not retained the color in cheeks, I would have taken him for dead. His eyes were closed, his breathing slowed to where you could barely see his chest move, and the brainwave gizmo registered theta waves, a sign of almost non-existent brainwave activity. He stayed like that until Jeremiah and Fogg returned.

Jeremiah waved the notebook.

"We went all the way down to Bethesda Fountain," he said. "I had Mr. Fogg pick a person at random and have that person write something in the notebook and then close it and seal it with scotch tape before giving it back to him. He held the notebook closed in his lap all the way back. Naturally, Mr. Fogg approached the prettiest chick in the park at the time to participate in the experiment."

"As long as I was wasting my time," Fogg said, "I might as well have a little fun."

"Neither of us knows what's written in the notebook," said Jeremiah. "The tape seal is still intact." He held out the notebook for our inspection. "This precaution eliminates any possible clairvoyance on Ward's part, although he never had a history of clairvoyance, anyway. Now, it's time to bring him out of it."

The good doctor turned off the brainwave machine and I removed the electrodes from Ward's temples and skull with Eddie's help. The monkey sat in Ward's lap while he gradually came back to the real world, shaking his head and blinking.

He was all smiles.

"Jesus Christ," he said to Jeremiah, "that egg and candle stuff really worked. You've given me just what I've needed but never thought was possible. I never in my wildest imaginings thought I could experience what I've experienced today."

He turned to Fogg.

"You're not going to like this, Mr. Fogg," he said. And then he quoted:

THE GUY WHO ASKED ME TO WRITE IN THIS NOTEBOOK IS  
AN ASSHOLE. I HOPE HE LEAVES ME ALONE.  
I REALY DO.

We opened the notebook and checked. Ward had it right to a 't': the three lines, all caps, written in pencil, "really" misspelled.

"This is a great moment in the history of human scientific endeavor," said the good doctor. He seemed happy as a pig in shit.

"How's that for perfect proof, Mr. Fogg?" asked Jeremiah.

You had to feel for Fogg at the time: he was both astounded and insulted. He walked over to face Ward in his wheelchair.

"How the hell did you do it?" he asked.

"I simply looked over her shoulder while she wrote it," Ward said.

Once again, the short hairs on my neck stiffened and my bowels clenched. With Jeremiah around, it was becoming a habit.

I tell you, Farber, I should have saved some of that shit for my retirement. But who knew?

I had a client on the Lower East Side and, as it happened to be one of Jeremiah's sporadic taxi-days, he offered to give me a lift. On the way downtown, he stopped for an old man around 72nd Street. I was sitting up front and the old man got in the back.

We had been talking about love.

"Have you told Cassie about your plans to marry her?" I asked. "When you told Father Terry, I almost fell out of my seat."

"I haven't told her and I didn't count on telling either you or Father Terry. It just seemed necessary at the time. You raised some serious spiritual issues which needed handling on the spot."

"Well, do you plan on telling her, or are you just going to sweep her off her feet and drag her downtown to civil court?"

"I'll tell her how I feel when I think it's time."

"That's what I want to know, Jeremiah. How does a man know when it's time to announce that sort of commitment to someone he loves?"

"Don't do it," came a shaky voice from the cab's rear seat. "Big mistake."

"Yeah?" said Jeremiah. "And why's that?"

He gave me a sly wink.

"Women can't be trusted," said the old man. "They'll be all nice as pie until they get their claws into you and then they start trying to run your life. Take it from me, there isn't one that won't get tired of a man as soon as he gives up and becomes her slave. Then they're boring."



Then they're nothing anymore. And next thing you know, she takes all your money and kicks you out of the house to make room for someone else."

Personally, the old man looked so seedy I wouldn't have stopped the cab to pick him up. His suit was giving out at the elbows and knees, and the brim of his fedora was crusted and stained with God-knows-what. In fact, the whole suit seemed two sizes too large for the old man, as if it were the closest fit he could find at Salvation Army or as if he had started wasting away months ago and it was the only suit he had. But Jeremiah was a radical humanist.

"Thanks, Pop," said Jeremiah. "I'll keep that in mind."

"No you won't," said the old man. "Men are too quick and eager to get laid. I know, take it from me, I know. When the dick starts moaning, a man loses control and runs off to get married just so he can get it regularly. I know lots of guys your age and the story's always the same. No, you won't take my advice."

He settled back in his seat, his lips working silently, his eyes drawn out beyond the cab, beyond the flow of Manhattan traffic, to some realm of memory known only to himself.

"Well," said Jeremiah, smiling. "There you have it."

We hit a light at 66th Street.

"It's not just that I'm nosy about what goes on between you and Cassie," I said. "Even though she gives me the creeps sometimes with her voodoo shit, I like her and I can well understand why you have strong feelings for her. The two of you seem so . . . comfortable together. But you've had lots of women. I haven't. And I'd like to know how you know that one woman in particular is the right woman."

"Listen, my young friend," he said, "I'm going through many drastic changes in my life now. Maybe if I'd met Cassie ten years ago, she'd have been just another roll in the hay like the

others were. Maybe if I were to meet her ten years in the future, it'd be the same. It's difficult to say anything about the nature of love that's not a platitude. But I figure a lot of it has to do with the timing."

"I disagree," the old man chimed in. Jeremiah rolled his eyes. "A man needs to have someone to take care of, that's all. It makes him feel important, you know. It makes him feel like . . . like a *man*."

His lips worked themselves faster, but made no sound. His eyes couldn't seem to settle on anything. For some reason the conversation seemed to agitate him.

"But it's all a fake," he said, "a fake and a lie. Pretty soon you realize that she only pretended to need you, that she's really got everything under control in a way no man can match. And she fixes it so that you end up needing her a lot more than she needs you. The woman you thought was going to make you strong turns out to have sucked all the blood from you like a vampire. You end up dry and pale and empty as a turnip."

The light changed and we headed downtown. Signs started appearing for the Lincoln Tunnel.

"Well," said Jeremiah, "that can be true. But not necessarily."

"Hah!" the old man laughed mockingly through his sparse, yellow teeth.

"See, kid," said Jeremiah, "I have as many years on you as that guy has on me. Come back in twenty years and I might be sounding just like him. No offense," he said over his shoulder. The old man waved him off. "But right now I've found in Cassie someone who shares my excitement for certain aspects of life and who also isn't threatened by my personal growth. That's important if what you're looking for is love and not . . . something else."

"But what about her personal growth?" I asked. "If she doesn't grow with you, won't you outgrow her? And, if she does grow, isn't there a chance she'll outgrow you? And . . . and what if she's already way ahead of you? What kind of chance do you have, then?"

Jeremiah thought a moment, then said, "I think I'm starting to get the picture. A guy your age doesn't get this interested in love as a state of being unless he's already in love, or on the verge of being in love. And he doesn't waste his time asking an old fart like me all these questions, when he should be asking them of his beloved. *Ergo*, I'd guess you haven't told the lucky girl yet that you love her. Maybe you're not sure you love her and that's why you're asking me all these questions. C'mon now. Confess. Who is she?"

I took a deep breath. "Twyla Cuahla," I said.

"An Irish girl!" the old man piped up. "I know all about Irish girls."

"I'm sure you do," said Jeremiah. "Y'know, kid, I admire your *chutzpah*. And your taste. Why, if I didn't have Cassie occupying my heart and soul, I'd be in love with her, too. She's good-looking, dynamic and has many admirable qualities."

"How the hell am I going to be able to tell her how I feel without making a fool of myself, Jeremiah?"

"I don't think that's a real issue," he said. "I don't think if you told her she'd think you foolish. Just young. I mean, she has ten years on me, for Christ's sake."

"An older woman, eh?" said the old man. "You know what they say about older women? 'They don't yell, they don't tell, they don't swell--and they're grateful as hell! Heh-heh-heh . . .'"

The old man settled back in his seat, chuckling.

"I'll tell you, Pop," said Jeremiah, "you're just the kind of fare I needed first thing in the morning. A Diogenes. A wandering philosopher searching for honest men."

"Go ahead, make fun of me if you want," the old man said, sounding nasty. "But I know how to get what I want. In fact, I just got what I wanted."

"And what did you want, Pop?" asked Jeremiah. Personally, I would have let the issue drop.

"O, I got what I wanted," the old man repeated.

"Suit yourself," said Jeremiah. "Keep it a deep dark secret."

"I'll tell you, though," said the old man in an oddly passionless voice as though he were finally running through his lips words which had been endlessly running through his mind, maybe for years and years. "A man's got to get his release. I mean, it gets all filled up inside him and somehow it's got to come out. When you're young, it's easy. It can even come out in your sleep. But at my age, a man needs help. That's why I went top the bathhouse first thing this morning. I got me one of the best blow-jobs ever."

"Ok, Pop," said Jeremiah. "I'm sorry I asked. I really don't want to hear any more."

I sunk down in my seat trying not to burst out laughing.

The old man kept at it, though. "And you know what?" he said, "it's the men there that give the best blow-jobs. No doubt about it."

"I'm sure," said Jeremiah, keeping his eyes straight ahead of him on the road. None of us said a word until the old man was dropped off on the west side of Hell's Kitchen. He paid quickly, without a comment, and disappeared just as quickly down 47th Street.

§

Meyer and Dionysia must've hit it off because every time Meyer saw me downtown he'd run up to me with a big hello, a hug, and a kiss on both cheeks, French-style. "How's it going," I'd say, and he'd run off at the mouth about how she took him *everywhere* after work, to galleries and dance workshops and special programs at the Open Center. He said it was like a dream come true.

"I'm very happy for you, Meyer," I told him.

"Without you," he said, "it never would've happened. Who could imagine a beautiful girl like Dionysia falling for a mokse like me. You're a real friend."

Was I? At first I was jealous of him. I was alone, I was in love with a woman who lived 150 miles away and who was too busy with truly momentous work to have ever given me a second thought, and I didn't even have the excuse that I was a dwarf. Then, when I wasn't jealous of him, I worried that in some convoluted way and for some reason known only to herself and owing to her peculiar magic, Dionysia was jerking him off.

Maybe it was some kind of kink she had for balling a dwarf. God knows from our rooftop encounters that Dionysia was no chaste, missionary-position-only type of chick. In my more heartless moments I saw her dreaming of countless numbers of dwarfs invading her bed, male and female, their tiny genitalia ripe for her lewd manipulations. Or could Meyer be some sort of red badge of courage she liked to parade around for her weirdo friends for the shock value. Was she engaged in some sort of "freak of the week" oneupmanship?

And would Meyer, in the end, be left worse off than before, devastated, maybe, or suicidal?

I ran those issues by Jean Luc as we sat in the little red lighthouse watching the barges motor up the Hudson. We hadn't spent quality time together in weeks because of our mutual commitment to Jeremiah's campaign. Sitting there with him reminded me of our growing up on the West Side.

"I wouldn't worry about it," he said. "You know you didn't mean him any harm. Just the opposite. I'm sure he's fully primed for rejection, sooner or later. He'll handle it when it comes. At least he's having a good time now. And as for being jealous of him, man, I'm jealous of him and I barely know the guy. It's human nature to be jealous of a man with a lover when you ain't got one yourself."

I felt like Jean Luc had just laundered me, body and soul, in the cold river and hung me out to dry. There I was moaning about Meyer and myself and forgot all about him having no one, either, and a physical defect problem more bizarre, and consequently worse, than any dwarf on earth.

"Jesus, man," I said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so insensitive about your feelings."

"Insensitive?" Jean Luc laughed. "Maybe for a little while you forgot all about me being a freak. I don't call that being insensitive. I call it being a friend."

"Jean Luc," I said, "if I was a chick, I'd fuck you myself."

"Now don't go doing me any favors," he said. "You're too damn ugly."

When we got back to Jeremiah's place, I was almost too frightened to knock on the door.

The hallway was filled with the scent of Cassie's special incense and weird atonal chanting and drumming and the rhythmic ringing of bells spilled out from his apartment. Flutes, too, reedy wailing flutes.

"What the fuck --" I said to Jean Luc. He shrugged his shoulders.

I knocked and Olaf opened the door.

"Where've you been, man?" he asked. "Jeremiah's been waiting for you two."

"There's work to do," came Jeremiah's voice from amidst a halo of candlelight and puppets. I don't know what scared me worse: the fact that the puppets seemed to live and breathe in the flickering candlelight or that Jeremiah, sitting among them like a tribal chief surrounded by his warriors, seemed carved out of wood. When he spoke, only his lips moved.

"C'mon in and let's get started," he said. "You have to get into the spirit of the experiment."

The Slovaki brothers filled the area under Jeremiah's sleeping loft. Noodles and Antoine had bongoes, Mike hammered on a child's xylophone. The rest of the music came from the speakers Jeremiah had hung from the corners of the room, just below the ceiling. Hobart sat on a cushion opposite Jeremiah. He seemed very self-conscious and scowled a lot.

"These need to be mailed," said Olaf, handing me three freshly-made gris-gris bags and a list. They were to go to Finkelstein, the landlord, the Ministry of the Interior in Czechoslovakia, and the Meditation Room at the Pentagon. With each bag was to be included one of Jeremiah's cards: "Compliments of Jeremiah Jaffee, Candidate for the Presidency of the United States" with a unicorn rampant embossed just below the lettering.

"They're gonna put you away," I said. "Maybe they'll put all of us away. This is gonna bring in the Secret Service and the FBI."

"It'll never get to the Meditation Room," Jean Luc added. "The bag will be trashed at the front desk."

"None of that's important," said Jeremiah. "The notes are in the bottles and the bottles need to be cast into the sea. Higher powers than us will have to take over from there."

Jean Luc and I looked at each other and shrugged. Then we joined the Merry Men and sat down to get to work.

"Before we begin," said Jeremiah, "I must tell you that Dom Mirandola and I have had a bit of a falling out. I'm sure it's only temporary, but until it's resolved, I have to explore the use of Blue Lotus without benefit of Dom's brainwave machine. Theoretically, it should be like biofeedback: once you use the machine to get the 'feel' of lowered brainwave states, you should be able to consciously bring about those states without mechanical intervention. That's what all these tribal 'atmospherics' are designed to help us accomplish."

"So what's the beef between you two? I asked.

"I wanted Dom to leave Ward Stevenson that machine set up permanently in his apartment. We could have trained Eddie to turn it on and off and Ward would be free to leave the confines of his body at any time. Dom's afraid that's being scientifically irresponsible. He's understandably concerned that Ward will become dependent on astral projection rather than continuing to cope with real life in the real world. That's a valid concern, certainly, especially considering Ward's condition. In fact, from what little I've experienced being in an out-of-body



state, it's a valid concern for all of us. The freedom to enter non-physical realms at will could be more addicting than crack or ice or speedballs.

"My perspective in regard to Ward is: What the hell? Let him leave his body as often as he wants. If he should figure out how to go and never return, so what? He's only anticipating what's going to happen to him, and all of us, down the road. My feeling is we should let him be happy. Dom says that's bad science, and it is. There's no control data, no supervision, no nothing. And after only one trip out, Ward's as psychologically addicted as a coke freak. He was weeping when Dom took the machine out of his apartment."

"Maybe the Doc's got a point," I said. "Reality's going to come crashing down on all of us somehow, no matter what we feel about it. Brainwave machines break or disappear, the supply of Blue Lotus dries up, any one of a million things are bound to trap Ward in his wheelchair again."

"Of course Dom's got a point," said Jeremiah, "and it's well taken. I just run more on instinct and intuition than he does. And emotion. Something's come to us out of the mystical realm of possibilities that drastically changes our menu of options regarding what's 'real'. I want Ward to be able to take advantage of that as much as possible. You're right: these new options may not be around much longer, anyway."

"I agree with Jeremiah," Jean Luc said in his softest, most introspective voice. I immediately realized how closely this debate meshed with our earlier conversation in the lighthouse. "There's time enough for Ward to be stuck in that chair. He's paid his dues. If we can free him, even for only a little while, we should."

"Well, then," said Jeremiah, "let's get started."

The game plan was to first see if the astral separation could be done without benefit of the brainwave machine. Then, Hobart and Jeremiah were going to hunt down Hobart's connection, Needham, and find his Blue Lotus stash. Hobart had tried and failed using more conventional channels, like the telephone. As far as he could tell, Needham had disappeared off the face of the earth.

Such is the power of the super-rich.

My job was to guard Hobart's physical body while Olaf guarded Jeremiah's. The Slovaki brothers had drifted so far into the musical incantations that they couldn't be stopped without bodily intervention, anyway, so they were assigned to keep up the tunes. Jean Luc manned the front door and took phone calls.

It took Hobart quite a while to settle down. His eyelids twitched every now and then, and his fingers were busy with hangnails, the pockets of his pants, and cracking his knuckles. Hobart had little experience with meditation techniques and mumbo-jumbo like that, and he was hardly what one would call a relaxed personality. But eventually, whether through the odd music or his past experience enhanced by the brainwave machine, he drifted off into a strange state of calm. It was as if he, like Jeremiah, had become just another puppet in the room.

When Jean Luc opened the door for Fogg, Mr. Politics jumped back like he'd been shot in the heart. "You scared the shit out of me!" he said in a tone I felt was thoughtless and cruel, but obviously out of Fogg's control. He came in and looked around.

"Jesus Christ," he said, "you mental cases aren't making my job any easier."

He threw himself into a soft chair in a state of collapse.

"I must be out of my mind," he said.

"It's an experiment," said Jean Luc. "If you can't handle surprises, man, then call first next time."

Jeremiah and Hobart gallivanted on the astral plane for at least 45 minutes. When they came out of it, Jeremiah was laughing.

"We got what we wanted," he said with a wink in my direction. "I've got to hand it to Needham for being creative. He and a few friends are already putting the Blue Lotus to good use--for them."

Then he stood up and grabbed his motorcycle helmet. He motioned to me to come with him.

"Quick," he said, still laughing, "we've got to get down to Ward's place. Eddie got into his Blue Lotus kool-aid."

"That fucking monkey," said Hobart. "He's doing astral somersaults all the way down to Staten Island."

§

Bo Lumen, Jeremiah and I watched the birth of a cloud.

A column of mist, warmed by the morning sun, rose up from the surface of Lake Zoar to a height of 30 or 40 feet. There, it gathered into a small bundle of white misty fluff which steadily grew as the air warmed, an embryo nourished by its lake-mother.

Danny Long sat at a picnic bench at the far end of the cove. I think he was watching the cloud being born, too but you could never tell with Danny.

Lou Scarpetta was on the swing, talking to his hands as he went up and down, up and down.

Bo's hair was longer and whiter than I remembered, a pure white made glossy by the brightness of the rising sun. The same with his beard. He leaned on a slender staff he had cut from a hanging vine. The tip formed a caduceus-swirl where it had grown around some other tree's branch.

"Do you recall Plato's allegory of the cave?" Bo asked.

"Yes," said Jeremiah. "It's in The Republic."

"Socrates maintains that it's the mission of the philosopher, after having risen above all appearances and false realities, to return to his fellows still in bondage to illusion and shadows and bring them back with him into the light of day. Remember that, Jeremiah. There will be a strong, if not overwhelming temptation to keep going out there, farther and farther, never to return.

"I feel that already," Jeremiah said. "That's why I'm laying down deeper roots in this reality in order to keep me coming back. Cassandra, this school, Club Q, my political windmills... at least for now, they keep me coming back. How long that will last, I can't say."

"I hope you'll be with us for a long time," said Bo. "The world needs desperately to have a share in what you're learning. You're not the first person to have discovered a doorway or a technique to render other planes of existence accessible. This Blue Lotus of yours and that brainwave machine of Mirandola's are just two out of thousands of methods which must have been employed since the beginning of human consciousness. Proto-men in the days before memory tapped into the Universal Mind to invent the wheel and fire and to begin to understand and calculate the movements of the stars. You will outgrow the Blue Lotus, Jeremiah, and brainwave machines and even outgrow rituals and magick. In the process you will have learned to walk upon the earth as one of God's sons. And you must teach the rest of us as you learn. We will lose you soon enough."

"I'll share what I can," said Jeremiah, "but please don't burden me with your great expectations. I'm a vulgar man, and often brutal. I'm very much a creature of my time and my world. I may not be able to fulfill the role of philosopher with any degree of Platonic grace."

"It's because you're what you are that I hold such great hopes, Jeremiah. Saints and hermits, ecstasies and renouncers of the flesh are drawn away from the rest of us too quickly, rising like that vapor into the womb of the mother-cloud. They don't even look back. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, they are useless. Your soul has the street, as well as the stars, mixed in it. That's what makes all the difference."

Jeremiah had nothing to say. He looked out over the lake at the growing cloud, and at Danny Long sitting at the picnic bench, and at Lou Scarpetta going up and down, up and down on the swing.

"Good morning, Lou!" he suddenly called out, waving his hand. "It's a fine morning, isn't it?"

"I love you too," Lou called out from the swing. Then he went back to talking to his hands.

"There you go," said Jeremiah, smiling. "If I ever have the effrontery to think I'm beginning to understand the Universe and the Nature of All Things, I'll just sit down with Lou and try and have a conversation for about 40 seconds and he'll set me straight."

Amen to that, I remember thinking at the time.

They've been pumping Farber with whole blood for three days now. Must be an internal hemorrhage.

That thin red strand of life running from the plastic bag to Farber's arm reminds me of that column of mist on Lake Zoar.

Wheels within wheels. We see and hear the same things, over and over again, only they're hidden from each other, disguised through the failure of our memory and wit to relate them. Every once in a while the emerging pattern behind our daily reality sinks through our thick skulls and we step back, amazed. And what's the end result of the revelation? It's all safely forgotten within a day.

What about it, Farber? Any idea whose blood they're filling you up with? Maybe a guy who runs his wife's corpse through a wood-chipper to destroy the evidence, and then donates blood the next week to be a good neighbor in the community. Maybe a repressed corporate exec with delusions of grandeur. Maybe a banker who rushed through a foreclosure so he could make it to the blood drive on time and score points with the upper echelons. Maybe a housewife who keeps herself out of harm's way by giving blood or baking for community cake sales or quilting with her charitable women's group instead of thinking about the man she should have married, instead.

Needham tried boosting himself into the astral plane with blood. I had to give him A for effort.

Jeremiah and Hobart saw him that day. He was transfusing a pint of his own blood into himself, breathing pure oxygen through a plastic mask attached to a cylinder, snorting cocaine and smoking Blue Lotus. Why? According to Hobart and Jeremiah, he was in his long Island



mansion, staring at the electronic stock quotes which marched from left to right across the wall of his study. He wanted to fuck with the numbers, that's all. He tried to raise or lower the number by force of will, fortified by Blue Lotus et al.

That's all he wanted from it. Can you imagine?

They also followed what Jeremiah later called "the trail of his astral vapors" back to his apartment off Fifth Avenue. They saw the immense bronze Buddhas. They also saw the ping-pong table upstairs in the duplex covered with tightly packed bricks of coke. Needham's little sideline obviously brought him more bread than all of his legitimate ventures put together. All of Seventh Avenue must have owed him for their high times.

And they also noted the location of two garbage bags, fully packed and tied shut with plastic strips, labelled "Blue Lotus."

"The buddhas seemed to be full of ghosts," said Jeremiah. "They rose and swirled like a confluence of bloody embryos within the great bronze mass. It was as if every prayerful soul which had worshipped before them and laid bare its sincerest prayers and most painful woes, was somehow retained within the statue. I could only see them," Jeremiah concluded, "because I was no longer looking at the statues with my eyes of flesh."

I remember Jeremiah staring as if at distant mountains. Even Fogg was entranced by the story they were telling, as were all of us.

Ever wonder, Farber, what ghosts are slithering into your veins with that fresh, thick blood?

Jeremiah came to me in a dream last night. We were young again and we sat in the little red lighthouse overlooking the river.

"Why are you troubling yourself about all that?" Jeremiah asked. "You should be getting ready to cross over."

He was smiling at me like I was his son. His hair and beard were much paler than I remembered, and I could see vaguely through his flesh the walls of the lighthouse and the palisades across the river.

"There's so much I still don't understand," I said. "That night all the people of the world saw the same vision and the world was changed forever, or so I thought. . . I can't make any sense out of all that. Every man woman and child witnessed the same miracle . . . yet generations come and go, people forget and others grow skeptical . . .

"Nothing substantial changed, did it? Our bodies still grow sick and weak. There are still poor and hungry people throughout the world. There is neither more nor less happiness among us that before that night.

"I don't understand why it happened at all, and why you and I were sucked into the middle of it."

Jeremiah turned away from me and looked out over the water.

"Twyla crossed over and never knew you loved her," he said. "If she had known, do you think she might have viewed the success or failure of her life differently?"

"I don't know. It's possible, I suppose."

A ferry glided effortlessly past the lighthouse to the far shore. Nick's souvlaki barque with all its ripe Greek smells rode the upper deck and Nick handed souvlakis out to all the passengers free of charge.

"He's gonna go broke," I said.

"It doesn't matter," said Jeremiah. "Nick was always an optimist."

"Do you think I should have told her?" I asked suddenly.

"You could have said something. She never knew and she would have liked to have known. It would have pleased her."

"I was afraid it would make me look foolish and make her ... uncomfortable."

A seagull hovered in front of the lighthouse window, staring at us. I didn't know seagulls could do that, hover in one place. I was amazed.

Jeremiah pulled a round wafer out of his pocket. It looked just like a subway token but smelled like honey and caraway seeds. He threw it for the seagull to eat. It swallowed the wafer and flew off.

"You'll just have to tell her the next time," said Jeremiah. "I've got to go."

"The next time?" I said. "I don't understand."

But Jeremiah was no longer there. I had awakened.

Farber, are you asleep?

I think I see your lighted tunnel and your shadows. . . .

Master Wu, the puppet, danced and spun around on the stage, waving these wild sparklers which erupted in fireballs of bright green and red and blue. Colorful silk streamers trailed behind him as he danced, making swirls and waves. Hobart accompanied the dancing puppet on the French horn with an original jig he composed just for the occasion.

The group home residents had a blast. They sat up front and hollered, roared, laughed, clapped, stood up and danced, sat down and bounced in their seats, cheered for the fireballs, dodged the fireballs, all at the same time. Fogg, always the master of political opportunism, timed the performance to coincide with a major street fair so that not only did the group home residents enjoy the show, but about a million other people had fun, as well, especially the kids.

You could always tell when Jeremiah was having a good time: he looked like a raving lunatic. There he was behind the stage with about a dozen puppets hanging off his belt, hopping from one foot to the other, leaping, spinning, and making unearthly shrieks and whoops and wows through a synthesized microphone strapped to his chin, donated by the ever-helpful Slovaki contingent. Watching Jeremiah from the sidelines, I kept thinking to myself *Headdress and Tom-Toms, Headdress and Tom-Toms*, over and over. He let each of the Slovaki brothers grab a couple of puppets and pretty soon they started a conga line down the middle of the street and everybody joined in, weaving left and right and in and out, until the whole street fair was one slithering dragon of humanity blowing winds of happiness and good fortune with its invisible wings.

That's when I noticed the tall, older man standing near the makeshift puppet stage but off to the side. He seemed familiar but I couldn't quite place him, so I went over to Jean Luc to see if he'd have better luck.

Jean Luc had set up a booth to sign up Project kids for special tutorials in reading and math. It was his own idea, something he had wanted to pull together for a long time, but never knew how to make happen. With a few pointers from Jeremiah and classroom space donated by the city, all he needed now was a roster of kids. They seemed to be signing up in droves. For the first time I could see in their eyes that Jean Luc was no more a monster to them than Yoda, ET or Santa Claus, a being both kindly and exotic, an object of fascinated adoration.

Jean Luc had never been happier, I guarantee that.

I tapped him on the shoulder and pointed the man out to him. "Do you recognize that guy?" I asked. "He seems awfully familiar, like I've seen him before and should remember him but I can't quite make it out."

"I see what you mean," he said. He stared intently and then smiled. "I know," he said. "He was at the first press conference. I remember he sat way in the back."

"That's it! That's the guy. Thanks!"

I ran back to the puppet stage and approached the man with an outstretched hand.

"You're a reporter, aren't you?" I asked.

We shook hands and he said, "Not exactly. But I am a writer."

"I remember you from Jeremiah's first press conference. There were only reporters on the sign-up sheet."

"Yes. I didn't sign the sheet."

"Well then, what kind of writer are you? Don't tell me you're from the Enquirer or the Star. Jeremiah knew you guys would start showing up sooner or later."

He laughed and dug in his pocket for a card. "No, I'm not with either of them," he said.

The card read: JOURNAL OF CO-TEMPORAL JURISDICTIONS, ARTHUR LOCKHART, SENIOR EDITOR.

"Do you work for Mr. Jaffee?" he asked.

"'Work for' usually implies pay," I said. "Let's just say I'm a campaign aide of his."

"Yes, I noticed he had quite an assortment of campaign aides," he said. "Do you think you can introduce me to him? I'd love to take him aside for a brief chat."

I wasn't sure if the guy was simply pointing out the obvious or being a wiseass. I figured I'd play it safe.

"Well, I'm sure he'll have no objection to talking to you, but first you should get to meet Mr. Fogg, his campaign manager."

"Likewise, no pay?"

"You read the position paper. Jeremiah runs a tight-fisted campaign: no budget at all."

Fogg stood watching the festivities with his hands behind his back and a big stinking cigar stuck in his mouth.

"Mr. Fogg," I said, "I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Lockhart. He writes for a magazine."

I handed him the card and he read it. "Never heard of it," he said, looking Lockhart up and down.

"It has a rather limited readership, Mr. Fogg. Some of our readers contend that it's a New Age type of journal, but really it's far more research-oriented."

"Do they let your readers out to vote?" said Fogg. "Heh-heh, just kidding."

"Mr. Lockhart would like to talk with Jeremiah," I said. "Any objections?"

"Kid," said Fogg, throwing his arms wide, "it's a party. As the ol' Frenchman said, 'Do what thou wilt.'"

The ol' Frenchman, eh? Sometimes you had to wonder about Fogg.



Noodles Slovaki looked like a fat Chinese buddha with kids crawling all over him. He made faces and weird whistles and let them play with the puppets. Sweat streamed down his face as he lay sprawled out on a stoop taking a break.

Jeremiah leaned against a wrought-iron fence with a little Spanish girl in his arms. She was laughing at a finger-puppet.

The article Lockhart handed Jeremiah was about Smitty the pimp's sudden demise.

Jeremiah handed it back. "Yeah, poor Smitty," he said. "The salt of the earth."

"I'm sure you had your reasons," said Lockhart. "The way you dropped that rapist off the roof demonstrated at least to me, if not the whole world, that your motives are pure, even if your methods are questionable."

Jeremiah looked him straight in the eye.

"Mr. Lockhart," he said, "you give off very positive energies. In fact, you're one of the few people I've ever liked on a first meeting. So before I fall in love altogether only to be scorned and rejected, please make your point."

Lockhart laughed.

"Mr. Jaffee, I like you, too," he said. "I'm not here to expose anything or blackmail you. Frankly, even if I wanted to, I don't think I could manage it. You're riding a very lucky star, my friend. Your aura is one bright halo of gold stretching for miles. That's why I find you so intriguing."

"My colleagues and I expected someone like you would emerge out of obscurity. My suspicions were re-confirmed at the press conference when I saw the gris-gris bag pinned over

the door. A colleague of mine recently received one at the Pentagon with your card attached. He wants me to thank you and assure you it's being put to good use."

Jeremiah smiled. "He's more than welcome," he said.

"I want to help you, Mr. Jaffee. Truly. I also want to learn from you, learn more about you and about the events which led you onto this very occult and mystical path. I also want to warn you."

"About what?"

"The last time a man mixed occult pursuits with political goals, the world was served up Adolf Hitler. He was influenced and some say indoctrinated by the Thule Society, a group of neo-Scandian pagans, Satan-worshippers really, in Germany. He rose out of nowhere and almost destroyed the world."

Lockhart looked meaningfully at the child in Jeremiah's arms.

"They say Hitler, too, loved dogs and children," he said.

"Only if the dogs were German shepherds and the children Aryan, Mr. Lockhart. Jews were vermin, like rats and roaches. My love tend to be a bit more eclectic."

"Quite so. That's good to hear, I'm sure. But never forget that there is a dark side to the forces you have committed yourself to. For every yin, there's a yang, so to speak. Maintaining one's balance is essential, especially when certain X factors are introduced into new equations."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Why, Blue Lotus is legendary among my circle of friends, Mr. Jaffee . . ."

"That Lockhart's quite a guy," said Jeremiah.

We watched him work his way toward Broadway to hail a cab.

"Friend or foe?" I asked.

"Friend, definitely. One more connection dropping out of the blue and into my lap. He makes damn good sense, too. Did you know that stuff about Hitler?"

"Nope."

"Neither did I. Now that's scary."

"Why? You don't think Cassie's satanic, do you? I mean, I know I've had my own doubts in the past . . ."

"Hell, no. She has a heart of gold, a true Earth-Mother incarnate. But I know I'm a sucker for a pretty face or a well-turned phrase. It's comforting to know I have people like you and Cassie and Bo and now Lockhart to keep an eye on me."

Suddenly I noticed Jean Luc. A real pretty Puerto Rican chick had nuzzled up pretty close to him and was helping kids sign his list.

"Check it out," I said to Jeremiah, pointing.

Every so often she'd look up from the kids and talk right up into Jean Luc's face, as if she didn't see the flesh at all but looked straight through to his heart. He must have felt us watching him because he turned to us suddenly and smiled. Jeremiah flashed him the ok high-sign. Jean Luc pulled a little pouch out of his pocket and flashed us the high-sign back.

"That Cassandra's something else," said Jeremiah. "She can whip up one hell of a gris-gris bag . . ."

We got all the Blue Lotus we'd ever need for the experiments from Needham via Hobart Swann. It seems that Hobart went down to Needham's apartment one night on the pretext of making a pot buy. When he got there he point-blank threatened to blow the whistle on Needham's coke operation if he didn't hand over all of his Blue Lotus. He laughed at Needham's denials and told him exactly where he kept the coke and how it was wrapped and how much there was.

"Heh-heh," said Hobart, "I thought he was gonna drop dead. He wasn't looking too healthy as it was, but you should've seen him turn white as a ghost. 'How'd you get in here?' he says to me. I said, 'Never mind the hows and the whys: just gimme the Blue Lotus.' I left with my horn case full of the stuff."

"A bold masterstroke!" said Jeremiah. "My compliments."

"Think nothing of it," said Hobart. "Nobody jerks me out of double cab fare and gets away with it."

I told you, Farber, that Hobart was no one to fuck with.

"Let's make a list," said Jeremiah.

"O, that'll make it real scientific," I said.

"Listen," he said, "lists lend a certain credibility to one's daily grind. Cassandra taught me that. Christ, she has a list for everything: chores, phone calls to be made, plants to be watered, new movements for her dances, clothes to buy. Why, she taught me all I know about lists."

"She's a woman," Hobart chimed in. "All women make lists, witchcraft or not."

"Ok," I said, "then put Ward at the top."

Jeremiah made a notation on the back of Lockhart's card and started to laugh.

"You had to see that monkey when we got there," he said to Hobart. "Out like a light. Chin to floor, butt smiling straight up to God. The plastic cup was on the floor right next to him. Ward was in a panic. He thought Eddie was dead from poison. When we got there, we woke him up easily enough. He leaped around the room howling and shrieking like he had a hot poker up his ass."

"You have to feel sorry for the monkey," said Hobart. "That must've been one hell of a bad dream."

"Hey, Ward was pretty hysterical, himself," I added. "Eddie's been a good friend."

"Ok," said Jeremiah, "Ward's top of the list. Who's next?"

"Ah, I've got a good one," I said. "Mike Slovaki."

Hobart and Jeremiah: "ARE YOU OUR OF YOUR MIND?"

"Excuse me. I thought it was a good idea."

"The astral plane isn't ready for Mike Slovaki," said Jeremiah. "Pick again."

"What about Meyer?" I said. "He could use a break from being a dwarf."

"He's got his hands full with Dionysia right now," said Jeremiah. "I'm sure that's just like being on the astral plane. Let's not complicate things right now. If she bumps him and he goes into some kind of heavy depression, then we'll consider it."

"He could visit his old man under the sewers, then," said Hobart, "to cheer him up."

"What about Jean Luc, then?" I said.

Jeremiah stroked his beard, considering the idea. "He's just taking off on a new life and new responsibilities," he said. "He probably wouldn't even be interested. But I'll ask him. I'll put his name down with a question mark."

We thought awhile without coming up with any names and then I thought I hit on a good one. "What about Harry Hull?" I said.

"He's certainly one who would put Blue Lotus to its proper use," said Jeremiah. "But he's no Epicurean, like myself. Psychotropic substances aren't his cup of tea for a variety of reasons, not least being that he'd never be able to look Father Terry in the face afterwards."

"There you go," said Hobart. "The priest! I know he could use a little Blue Lotus, for Chrissake."

Jeremiah shook his head.

"That would shake the foundations of his faith," he said, "and fuck him up royally. If he should ever leave the church on his own, I'll make sure he gives me a forwarding address."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," I said, "I've got a real good one: Bo Lumen!"

"Now there's an idea," said Jeremiah. "I wasn't even thinking of the Lake Zoar crowd. Although Bo probably doesn't need Blue Lotus: he strikes me as being out on Saturn without fuel additives. But he goes down on the list."

"And D-J Case?" I added.

"A bit more problematic," said Jeremiah. "People who work that many years among people with mental dysfunction would, I imagine, hesitate to explore altered states of consciousness. Too much personal risk. Although I bet D-J would come up with some pretty creative applications for its use . . ."

"Like giving some to Lou Scarpetta, you mean?" I asked.

"Don't even joke like that," said Jeremiah.

Then we both fell on the floor in hysterics.

"Lou . . . on the astral plane . . ." said Jeremiah. "I'd like to get that on film . . ."

"You know something?" I said, "he probably wouldn't even notice the difference."

"More's the pity," said Jeremiah, wiping his eyes, "more's the pity."

§

Let's see now: quincunx. Quincunx, quincunx, quincunx. Run that over your tongue a few times, Farber. It means . . . something. I'm trying to remember.

I can't remember.

Christ, the songs I used to pick up without half trying, the phone numbers, addresses, names. I don't know if my brain's gone soft with old age and disease or if I'm so close to crossing over that I just can't focus on the things of this world anymore.

Quincunx. It used to be on the tip of my tongue.

I wonder if Farber's back in his tunnel watching shadows. Will he get any closer, this time? Will he then wake up and tell me what he saw? Or will he go the distance?

Christ, I want to know what's on the other side. I have a few unresolved questions provoked by Blue Lotus and what I call the Jaffee Equations regarding Regions unKnown, or JERK, for short. I found the equations written on the back of Jeremiah's annotated copy of Beckett's ill seen, ill said which he left beside the tree and the stone on the hill when . . .

When?

When.

They are as follows:

$$e=MC^2$$

$$\text{Epiphany} = \text{memory (consubstantiation)}^2$$

$$r=\frac{2GM}{c^2}$$

$$\text{revelation} = \frac{2 \text{ God (Man)}}{\text{consustantiation}^2}$$

From which he derived all sorts of goodies, such as:



$$\frac{2 \text{ God (Man)}}{\text{revelation}} = \frac{\text{Epiphany}}{\text{memory}}$$

Leading to:

$$\frac{\text{Epiphany}}{\text{memory}} \times \frac{\text{revelation (Man)}}{2} = \text{God}$$

Which Jeremiah summarized as:

Even half a man, under the right circumstances, can ...become God.

Not "partake of God's bounty"

Not "participate in God's holy choir of angels"

But "become God"

Thus, we are back to Consubstantiation<sup>2</sup>, the term eliminated from the equation

It both is and is not

A holy mystery

Can you believe it, Farber? *That* crap I remember. I studied that bookcover like it was a sex manual. Over and over I played with the terms and tried to see meanings emerge in my mind's eye.

Then the questions, Farber:

Did Smitty the pimp, after his last elevator ride, become God?

Did that rapist, after Jeremiah let him loose, become God?

Was there any "epiphany" and "revelation" in their sudden, brutal ends?

Did Ward, found cold in his chair, and Eddie, found cold in Ward's lap, become God?

Is Jeremiah God now?

Will you be God, Farber, or will I?

Is whatever God is big enough to be all of us sooner or later?

Or had Jeremiah simply gone off the deep end when he scribbled his last message on the book's cover?

You can't judge a book . . . That's it, Farber! Father Terry's quincunx over the door to the Club Q, the five on a die, the wounds of Christ he said it was, yes, one in each hand, one in each foot, and one for good measure in the breadbasket, the one that dripped water. He had said it was meant to fight the power of the winking blue eye across the street, that nothing could withstand the holy power of the quincunx, that the quincunx would wipe out the blue eye in time, maybe make it weep or bleed . . .

I'm bleeding now, Farber. I can feel it like tepid piss spreading through my insides.

Farber, then, a toast! To all of us half men who would be God!

Twyla invited Father Terry to spend a weekend at the school so he could see for himself how Annie changed.

When we arrived, she was doing laundry with Steven Barber. Steven had a new helmet that would protect his head without blocking his vision. Every so often his knees would buckle and he'd laugh and hang on to Annie as tightly as he could. She never lost her patience but would gently release his grip and both sign and say, "Stand up, Steven. It's time to work." She had to take his wrists in her hands each time he placed an article of clothes in the washer to make sure he completed the motions and didn't just laugh and buckle to the floor and drop the clothes. Stand up, Steven. It's time to work. Stand up, Steven. It's time to work. Again and again, a little saint she seemed, never tiring, never frustrated, obviously loved by the boy who looked for

every opportunity to drop what he was doing and cling to her. Every minute or so a timer would go off and she would quickly jot a mark on a clipboard hanging at her waist.

Father Terry watched from where she couldn't see him. This was the same girl he had spoken with in group counseling sessions who talked of "tricks" and "johns" and how much Smitty told her to charge for each category of sexual act. This was the girl whose favorite pastime was "scoping out buns and bulges."

The priest had tears in his eyes. He left quietly, not wanting to disturb her.

When Johnny Gee got blown away, the cops went through every pocket. They found his condoms and his good luck charms. I'm sure he had little sorts of crap that he would be ashamed of have had anyone see. For example, one guy I knew wiped his snot off in his pockets. Another guy kept a magic potato with him at all times. For days after Johnny's funeral I was haunted by the fear of being blown away and then stripped and searched by the cops. Christ only knew what I had on me at any one time.

For my sketch book alone, they'd have put me away.

Carlton Walker kept everything he owned in his pockets. He came from an institution. In an institution, anything that's not in your pockets doesn't belong to you. Carlton liked to stand on the edge of social gatherings and run his hands in and out of his pockets. He wanted to be liked but he also didn't want anyone to get close enough to steal any of his stuff. When he and I had a chance to be alone, he showed me what he had: a key on a beaded chain that fit no known lock, a toy watch, a couple of Lego pieces, handkerchief, a rubber ball, and three beans in a box. He laughed out loud each time he showed me a new treasure. When they were all spread out on the table between us, he pushed them to me one at a time so I could hold it.

It was the night of the Hunter's moon. Jeremiah, Father Terry and Bo Lumen had already gone down to the lake to watch it rise over the hills. With all the moisture in the hill country, the night was especially brisk. I walked upland toward the tree and the stone. In the corner of my eye I saw Carlton following me, trying to keep out of sight with his awkward lope, and rubbing his hands all over his pockets.

I had already drunk my portion of Blue Lotus.

She came out when the moon was at its height.

The thing about the sense of separation is that, first of all, you can't move. It's like you're asleep and paralyzed and wide awake, all at the same time. I looked straight ahead but I wasn't seeing her with my eyes, at all, but with something behind my eyes, something that could see beyond and above my eyes. There was a roaring in my ears, too, as if I held conch shells on each side of my head.

I sat on the stone just in front of where the tree curved over it. Carlton watched me from about 20 feet away, standing among wild laurel bushes. I could clearly see his silhouette among the spiderweb shadows of leaves and branches cast by the bright moonlight.

And suddenly she stood in front of me, little Lurinda, pewter-blue in the hunter moon's beam. As I had seen her do before, she took off toward the little wooden church.

The separation of soul from body occurs with the ease of thought. Those who interpret the experience with obscure and mystical jargon are playing to a packed house. I simply willed myself to drift along with the little girl and there I was, far from my own flesh which I saw waiting for me on the stone in an attitude of absolute patience and serenity. I felt exhilarated, aware for the first time of being what I, in truth and substance, really was from the earliest creation of the universe to the end of all time.

I found myself in the churchyard with Lurinda. There had been no sensation of transit from where we had been to where we were. She stared at me like a shy child.

Local legend said she was looking for her headstone but now I learned the truth.

"Have you seen Amanda?" she asked in a voice that whispered directly into my mind.

"Who is Amanda?" I asked. "I don't know her."

"She's my kitten," said Lurinda.

The fever had taken her in the middle of the last century and her only concern throughout her delirium was that Amanda would be lost in the woods where they had last played together. She had no recollection of taking the kitten home and then falling sick.

"There's no need to worry about Amanda, honey," I said, willing my words into her mind. "She's perfectly safe."

"If I don't find her, she'll die of cold when it snows," the child said simply.

I couldn't argue with her, so I said, "Then we'll just have to find her, won't we."

I had an idea. Again with an act of will, I cast a plume of my own ethereal substance among the tall grasses of the little cemetery adjoining the church.

"There she is now," I said.

A little blue kitteny spirit frolicked in the moonlight.

Lurinda showed little outward emotion but simply drifted toward the kitten and lifted her into her arms.

"I'm sorry for leaving you," she said to the kitten, which licked her and gently pawed her fingers. "I'll never leave you again."

And they were gone and I was back sitting on the stone and if I didn't know better, I'd swear it was all a dream.

"Let's go, Carlton," I said. "It's time to go back home."

Go in unto Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, that I might show these My signs in the midst of them; and that thou mayest tell in the ears of thy son, and of thy son's son, what I have wrought upon Egypt, and My signs which I have done among them; that ye may know that I am the Lord.

"And when I finished cursing God," continued Ward's voice on the tape, "I put Him away from me, I put Him out of my mind. He had made Himself known to me with locusts and darkness and the deaths of the first-born, and from the confinement of my wheelchair I had no room to dissipate my hatred and no focus for my anger other than my God and myself. I wanted no more of the God of locusts and darkness and the deaths of the first-born.

"I wanted no more of my crippled and angry self, either."

We didn't know at the time that it would be Ward's last broadcast. While we were up at Lake Zoar, Ward was making a final break with his "crippled and angry self." Before we left for the lake, he asked me to bring the tape up with us so we could give him some feedback on his ideas when we returned.

He said nothing about the tape being his way of saying goodbye.

"I suppose," Ward continued, "that my anger and hatred had hardened my heart enough for God to find me ready for fresh signs and wonders. It is well known that the ways of God are mysterious and certainly in my case the instruments of His Will were downright bizarre. But they were sufficient to the task."

There were five of us in the rowboat: Bo Lumen and Father Terry sat in the stern, Jeremiah and Cassandra sat in the bow, and I rowed from the middle seat. The sky threatened a storm and Lake Zoar was consequently still as glass and deserted except for our rowboat. I watched the approaching thunderhead in fascination. It looked more like a mountain than a

cloud, like pictures I had seen of the Fuji volcano in Japan, hovering immensely over the lake. As I stared at the phantom mountain, my mind played tricks on me. I thought I saw tiny people making their way slowly up and down its rocky slopes.

"I have learned through direct and concrete experience that I am a creature of both spirit and substance. Part of me is simply a vehicle, driven by the forces of genetics and evolution to survive intact under the conditions set by this particular planet circling our particular variety of sun. The other part of me is the passenger aboard that vehicle, an eternal part which will survive beyond the death of the flesh, which, I could well imagine, has already survived the deaths of much flesh.

"I leave it to philosophers and anthropologists to determine why this truth seems to incomprehensible to our people. Those who have had out-of-body experiences or near-death experiences will smile inwardly at my words, knowing both their truth and also the impossibility of sharing that truth with those who have not shared their experiences. Philosophers and anthropologists will be able to explain how people have been forced to substitute rituals and dogmas and mythologies for actual experience. They will also explain how those who have seen through the narrowness of ritual and dogma and mythology and yet have been denied this core experience, will turn merely toward things of the senses, things they can touch and taste and smell and see as evidence of their being real, and toward a narrow logic of causality and progression.

"But, as I say, I'll leave all of that to the philosophers and anthropologists."

Father Terry listened very closely to the tape and seemed much disturbed by what he heard. In his perplexed face I read the story of a man filled with second-hand accounts of holy miracles from earliest youth and who, in spite of a dedicated lifetime of service to his fellow



men, still mourned that he had, himself, never been touched directly by the hand of God, had never been shown a burning bush or a pillar fire by night. Perhaps that was why he chose the quincunx to hang over the door of his rescue mission: he, like Thomas before him, needed to dip his fingers into the bloody wounds of Christ before he could believe fully in his heart of hearts.

"I have forced myself to return from that other realm of experience to share with all my listeners this great revelation. I no longer fear death and I have re-learned to love God. I share these words with you and that is all I can do. I fervently pray that someday God will see fit to grant all of his children one vast and simultaneous vision. Perhaps with that vision our warring dogmas and fear of death will dissolve, and we will be able, as a single united species, to transcend our current limitations and become one with the universal Mind and Spirit."

Cassandra moved closer to Jeremiah. He put his arm around her shoulders.

"I want to thank those friends of mine who made it possible for me to feel this new life inside me and to know what further steps I must take. I thank, and love, all of you from the bottom of my heart."

That's how the tape ended.

The sky and the water smelled gray. The Fuji-cloud tumbled toward us and, fearful of the impending avalanche, I rowed aggressively toward the shore.

I was outside Twyla's office when I heard Molly McCord ask Father Terry if Annie could come live with them.

"I have family in Michigan," she said, "and they've offered to share their farm with Celeste and me. They're good people, Father, and they'll give Celeste and Annie a loving environment."

The door wasn't shut and I watched Molly turn from the priest to face Twyla. Celeste sat to one side, nibbling on a magazine. Annie took it gently out of her mouth.

"I've learned to regret the years I spent away from my daughter," Molly said. "By shutting her out of my life, I realize I shut part of myself away in a kind of darkness. I couldn't bear to have that darkness return. I want Celeste with me always. Now, I know how much trouble she can be and I know I'll need help. I can't do it alone, and I don't want it to become burdensome for my family. Someone like Annie, though, will make it all possible. I'll see to it she gets her schooling and all the comforts a working woman can provide. There's no Prince Charming in my future and no way I can see of getting around plain old hard work, but I feel like Annie and I are family now . . ."

Her voice trailed off. I could see Annie, that tough little road warrior, with tears streaming down her cheeks. Suddenly she fell into Molly's arms, a little girl once more, clinging to Molly's warmth and softness and love.

"I'm sure," said the priest, looking over at Twyla, "Ms. Cuahla and I will be able to work something out."

Celeste looked on with benign indifference, the corner of her magazine once more in her mouth.

We couldn't find Jeremiah or Cassandra anywhere, so Bo and I headed up the hill without them. On the way we passed Twyla, Molly, Annie and Celeste sitting around a campfire. They were talking softly, the sound of their voices unintelligible from where we stood, yet crisp as the crackling voice of the fire.

"Just look at them," Bo said. "That's a scene right out of the ancient days when the generations of priestesses gathered to make magic and support the fertility of the earth and the tribal womb."

Now that Bo had me look, I couldn't take my eyes off them. The leaping flames of the campfire cast a flickering glow on their faces that caused them to alter and shift into many faces, hundreds and thousands of faces, all the faces, in fact, that each was destined to wear in the course of her many lives, both past and future. By turns they became youthful goddesses and ancient crones, virginal and full of lust, wise with the knowledge of herbs and animals, and crazy with hidden visions, fearsome with vengeance and beautifully serene.

Bo tapped my shoulder and we continued up the hill.

From behind I heard the crush of twigs and familiar voices. A giggle was stifled. Out of the corner of my eye, and assisted by the Hunter's moon, I saw Carlton awkwardly navigate from shadow to shadow.

A few paces behind him, Lou Scarpetta talked to his hand.

I'm losing my eyes.

It couldn't have been so long since the blue light next to the toilet door showed Farber's tubes and sheets in clear relief against the room's nighttime darkness, could it? Last night I could make out only vague patches of light and dark. There seemed to be shadows gathered around Farber's bed, shadows that moved, shadows that bent over Farber and sheltered him from the other darkness of the night. At times I thought the shadows consulted one another like doctors and medical students making their rounds. There were voices but very faint voices, as if they spoke in whispers from very far away. I couldn't make out what they were saying because they spoke so softly and because of the roaring in my ears.

Maybe it wasn't last night. How can I be sure? Maybe it was during the day, maybe an hour ago, even, and the shadows were, in fact, doctors. My senses can't be trusted anymore, not my eyes or ears or even my sense of time. My mind has been guided by those senses for so long that now it's difficult to distinguish between their loss and the possible loss of my intellectual faculties.

Christ, Farber, everything seems to be going all at once ...

The good doctor's brainwave machine worked by reducing electrical output to the levels of near-death. It's the poison in magic mushrooms and peyote that brings the mind toward the death-state and produces visions. People who died and were revived report seeing an alternate universe, a place of shadows and tunnels of light. Death. How different it is from what we're taught to expect. A transition, a becoming . . . a returning to . . .

And the Angel of Death, a horror, a monster, a skeleton with a scythe or, like Shiva, a fanged killer with lips stepped in blood, trampling human skulls...

The blood of the sacrificial lamb, smeared on the lintels and posts, will keep the Angel of Death away . . . Jeremiah told me that story, years ago.

Not you and me, Farber. There's not enough blood in the whole universe to keep that grinning angel from our door . . .

We found Danny Long sitting on the stone. He had found Jeremiah's book and was tilting it toward the moonlight to make out the words. When we arrived, he seemed unconcerned and placed the book in Bo's outstretched hand without even glancing down.

"They must've been here before," I said. "Maybe they went further on toward the church."

Bo examined the book and discovered the equations. "Fascinating," he said, and passed it to me. I couldn't make heads or tails of it at the time, but something electric passed through me as I realized that Jeremiah was on to something special.

I gave the book back to Danny but he left it on the stone and just stared up at the Hunter's moon shining through the trees.

"Sit down with me," said Bo. I did, and back in the shadows I heard Carlton and Lou do the same. There was a soft, rhythmic scraping of branches as Lou rocked back and forth.

I had two portions of Blue Lotus with me. I offered one to Bo, but he waved it away.

"Drink both," he said, smiling. "They may be helpful to you tonight."

Ok, I did. I didn't quite know what he meant by that remark but, as the Blue Lotus spilled down my gullet and I nestled into the soft grass beneath me, feeling as though fingers of roots were sprouting from my body and sinking down, down and further down to the fires at the center of the earth, it didn't much matter.

First one bat, then another, then more and more.

I couldn't move. I heard the flutter of their leathery wings and their high-pitched squeals over the roaring in my ears. There seemed to be more bats than stars in the night sky, wheeling and swerving and squealing under the glare of the Hunter's moon.

Then I was among them. Next to me was Bo's phantom, dusted with silver, wheeling and swerving with me among the horde of bats.

As the horde of bats wheeled more furiously, they were transformed into sparks of light, and the moon and the earth and the stars became sparks of light as well, one continuous band of frenzied lights, distinguishable as bats and moon and earth and stars only by clouded and obscure vision, the perspective of creatures half-blind with living with their noses in the ground.

We drifted as lights among lights, far beyond the Hunter's moon. And from the apex of shadow beyond the moon we watched it pass before the sun, blotting the sun with its round shadow, until the corona blazed around the darkness in a glory of radiant colors.

It felt as if I were sliding down a hill of ice, traveling at incredible, impossible speeds. We fell into the dark shadow of the moon encircled by the rainbow band of light. The darkness grew deeper and more profound until there was nothing but darkness, thick and empty, the darkness of the universe before the creation of light. I felt Bo at my side though he could not be seen. We continued falling, my soul trembling with stark terror.

First an immense smear of rainbow light flew at us from a great distance, and, as it approached, I saw one bright star streaming plumes of gases into the smear, and around that star one planet circled, and around that planet circled one tiny moon.

That star and its tiny companions were, themselves, being pulled into the smear of colors. In whatever dimension we had entered, Bo and I were witnessing the end of Time and Substance as the final singularity absorbed the last evolved matter into its lightless core.

We fell in a great arc toward the star. Its color was mauve, a freakish distortion of its light caused by the nearness of the vast rainbow smear. The tiny planet swelled as we fell toward it, revealing the wrenching effects of the death of Time and Substance: it had been squeezed and twisted until, no longer a sphere, it had become a fissured dragon, spinning as if on a cook's spit, its eyes vast topaz cliffs gazing into the mauve sun.

*Bo! I heard my voiceless mind erupt Bo! Look! On the cliffs!*

At the apex of the cliffs, where the dragon's horn sprouted, stood an immense unicorn the color of polished emerald. Around its neck a gris-gris bag marked with a quincunx hung suspended. Sitting on the unicorn was Cassandra as Starwoman, a goddess of light and vapor. She held a second gris-gris bag in her right hand and scattered radiant particles from it. The particles swirled into a spinning cyclone of colors that spewed into the solar wind and fell swiftly toward the singularity.

Cassandra's hair was luxuriant vapor. Her eyes were vacant opal ghosts.

We fell past the cliffs and Jeremiah's voice, emerging from the motionless unicorn, fell upon my mind:

But fear not thou, neither be dismayed,  
for, lo, I will save thee and thy seed  
from afar: fear not thou,  
for I am with thee!

With those words, newborn and ancient at once, ringing in my mind, we sped beyond the dragon-planet and, with a thrill of indescribable orgasmic pleasure, we entered the plume of



mauve and magenta and purple gases that streamed from the star and fell into the rainbow smear of light.

Time and movement slowed into a prolonged ecstasy as we entered the singularity. All light and colors dimmed and were extinguished as if by an invisible breath. Again we fell through a darkness that felt thick and endless. I couldn't think for joy.

And then I realized we were in the vast black void of Bo's dream-vision, for there rose up slowly from the limitless distance a quivering dance of five lights. The lights streamed toward us faster and faster until we drew close enough to see that, like wounded embryos, they dripped electric blood.

And then we fell with impossible speed into the central light and fell and fell through red and orange and green and blue and the blue was an eye a winking wise and joyous eye and we kept falling through the eye and through the fires at the center of the earth and through the tree and the stone . . .

There was no longer a roaring in my ears. My heart was pounding and I felt my lungs swell greedily for the night air. I smelled moonlight and the spoor of elves.

Carlton was picking lumps of bioluminescent fungus off dead logs. Lou still rocked and talked to his hand. Danny was nowhere around.

"Come on," said Bo, rising unsteadily to his feet, "let's go back down."

I had another dream about the lighthouse, only this time Johnny Gee floated outside the window instead of the seagull. "C'mon," he said, "wait'll you see my new car." I walked over to the window and could see right through Johnny to the river which ran shiny as molten silver, just like Lake Zoar under the Hunter's moon. The sun was swollen and attended by five whirling sundogs which made my shadow in the lighthouse spin along the curved walls.

"It looks like the sun's gonna go nova," I said.

"So we'll get in the car and drive to where we can watch the show."

In my dream this made perfectly good sense, but as I stepped out of the lighthouse window, I woke up.

Farber, the poor bastard, was already gone. No I-V bottle, no respirator, no mattress. It was like he was never there.

That's the way it goes, I suppose. The rivers are endless and as you sail from bend to bend toward whatever dream or vision is hanging before your eyes, you leave behind a world that remembers you, if at all, only through rumor or piecemeal anecdote or downright lies. But it doesn't matter because you're already way down the river, involving your spirit and your mind with a million fresh intrigues and scandals.

To look at me now you wouldn't think I was once advisor to an American President. For that matter, if you had seen Jeremiah five minutes after leaving office, you wouldn't have guessed in a million years that he had *been* President. He was so broke that he had to bum tokens off me to get from Kennedy to the Upper West Side. "I'm not in this for the money," he always told me, and Jesus Christ he proved it with a vengeance. O, his credit was good I

suppose, but neither credit nor good intentions will get you past the turnstile of a New York subway. That's just the way it is.

As for his Presidency, well, that's politics and I hate politics. Let's just say he did ok. He left the world a better place. His Fireside Puppet Shows thrilled kids all around the world and, after leaving office and before he and Cassie went hiking in Tibet, he made a few bucks with the Slovaki brothers producing puppet theater for the networks.

Yes, Cassandra stuck with him to the end, although she turned down his marriage proposal because she didn't want to be singled out for public attention as his First Lady. "So we'll keep it secret," he told her, but she still refused. Besides, she was dedicated to her dancing. Consequently, Jeremiah became the first President known for his passion for modern dance.

They disappeared from history when they went to Tibet. Maybe they got washed off the side of a mountain during a morning thaw, and maybe they grew old together in Mongolia somewhere, eating yogurt in some yurt and living happily ever after. Who knows? With the two of them, anything's possible.

As for Hobart, he denied ever using Blue Lotus to put him in touch with the Universal Source of Bach and Mozart's genius. But he started writing horn concertos and symphonies that put him in the musicology lexicons of mystical geniuses like Scriabin, Stravinsky, and Schütz. So I respected his privacy and never asked any further regarding Blue Lotus. However, I'd recommend it as a research topic for any budding musicologist studying for his Ph.D.

Twyla Cuahla found herself with federal grants up the ass, so she ended up traveling the world spreading the gospel of taking people seriously. The school was managed by graduates of Club Q and remains so to this day. On the strength of her success, and with the help of Jeremiah and Father Terry, the whole human service system was turned around. Ex-cons and addicts

became valuable labor resources when funding was made available to treat the disease, not the symptom. After all, according to Twyla, crime and addiction were the results of living empty lives. "When the convicts and debtors of England became the ruling class of Australia," she said, "that proved a valuable point."

She was a real mover and shaker when she got rolling. Elite corps of former burn-outs turned agricultural and engineering specialists were sent to work in the dirtiest, most dismal corners of the world. And they turned things around. They built many of the Third World's most thriving metropolises like Kamu Kim, Baarang, and, yes, Cuahlaville. Without them, the development of the oceanic domes, the orbital space-hives, and the lunar cities would have been set back 50 years. I know. I always watched out for Twyla's interests and helped keep her ideas current in the Beltway scene by dropping names to her backers and working out little tits-for-tats.

But that's politics and I hate politics.

Jeremiah was right in that dream: I should've said something to her along the way.

What a waste.

The kicker is that nobody ever noticed how the world changed that night, not the astronomers nor the geologists and certainly not the average guy in the street. Bo Lumen and I could only scratch our heads over that. And smile.

We came down the hill and saw to it that Carlton and Lou got to their rooms. Then we stayed out under the stars to talk. Bo took out a stopwatch.

"23 minutes and 19 seconds," he said. "And our visions match. We've been shown a miracle, you and I. It's as if we've lived our lives on the face of a clock and have just been taken on a tour of the gears and wheels."

"Yeah, it beat the hell out of any burning bush or pillar of fire."

"The question now is how can we universalize our personal experience? Just telling about what we saw won't make a bit of difference. If only there had been some permanent artifact that we could show the world, some handwriting on the wall or some vision lingering for all to see in the night sky . . ."

That's when we both looked up and saw it.

"Holy shit . . ." I whispered. I could barely breathe.

"That's it!" said Bo. And he started to laugh until the tears poured down his cheeks.

The band of stars we call the Milky Way used to trail across the sky from the hills of Tolbrook to the foggy red glare of McClellan Heights. Now it ran perpendicular to that.

"We've been pole-shifted!" Bo said. "The planet's been turned end-over-end! Look at that sky!"

It was, indeed, one hell of a miracle. No earthquakes, no tidal waves, no torrents of electromagnetic phenomena.

Just a whole new world.

However, like all good miracles, there had to be room for doubt. That way a belief in human transcendence over the physical realm could be based on faith as well as fact. Seen in that light, I suppose it was a masterstroke of miracle-making to alter, along with the earth's orientation, all human memories and collected data to the contrary. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, nothing had changed. The new night was just like any other night to those who knew no better.

"I don't know," I said after awhile. "Maybe we're not back at the same place we started from. Maybe we're in some parallel universe where this is the way it always was, and we're the only difference."

"Which, of course, would be miracle enough," Bo said. "In either case, we have the rest of our lives to spread the word that the hand of God still reaches out to us now and then to show us He still watches and still cares."

And that's exactly what Bo did. He and his followers called themselves Pole-Shifters and their philosophy and radical and transcendent humanism spread throughout the world, even onto the space colonies and deep below the sea.

And so, Farber, I wish you well on the ride of your life. You now know what the rest of us still here struggle so hard to understand and believe. But it's like Chinese boxes, Farber, mysteries packed within mysteries, so we'll always have boundaries to cross and miracles to overwhelm us.

And that's just fine by me.

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